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# THE FIREBRAND from BURNT CREEK

by Frank C. Robertson

A FULL LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

ABOUT THIS WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC

# The Firebrand from Burnt Creek

**By FRANK C. ROBERTSON**

Desperate indeed is the plight of the Township of Eden—and the lovely Fern Dawson—when Don Fullmer arrives for a visit with his widowed young sister, Fanny Carlton, owner of a ranch a few miles from town.

Jud Motley, and his band of desperadoes, have been terrorizing Eden, and when Don leaps to the rescue of Fern Dawson, beaten by her father, he discovers that he has been pitched headlong into a series of blood and thunder adventures which call out his entire wit and skill.

The Motley gang has been slowly acquiring, by devious methods, the cattle of the surrounding country. And Jud is planning to marry Fern to gain control of her title to a silver mine he covets. Aiding Jud is the wealthy Virla Carlton, Fanny Carlton's sister-in-law, with whom she lives. There is also Ad Tolson, Don's trusty aide, a tall, powerful woodcutter, a lonely woodsman with a mysterious and tragic past. For some obscure reason Tolson is spared, but not Don, who is pursued relentlessly by the outlaws who fear the annihilation which comes to them in the end.

Daring ruses, straight shooting, splendid riding, set the pace for this western story, crammed with the exciting brand of villainy and bravery, thoroughly enjoyed by all Robertson fans.

# THE FIREBRAND FROM BURNT CREEK

by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

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# *Chapter* 1

FIVE minutes ago Don Fullmer saw the thin spiral of wood smoke floating lazily over the trees. A ramshackle fence indicated that he was near the first ranch he had encountered for forty miles. A quickening of Blackie's stride signified that his horse, too, sensed human habitation.

"So yuh wanta visit, huh?" Don remarked good-naturedly. He pinched out his cigarette and pushed open the gate through which ran a badly kept road. He was a tall, thin, personable young fellow with a shock of unruly black hair, clear-seeing, laughing grey eyes, and a manner of complete at-homeness on a horse.

He was reaching to close the pole gate when the stillness was shattered by a woman's scream. It was a scream of fear, or pain. It was followed by another, and another. Then silence.

Don dropped the gate. Grabbed Blackie with the spurs. Fifty yards on he entered a little clearing. He noted a squatty, dirt-roofed log cabin, and a set of dilapidated outbuildings. Then he beheld a sight which set off his temper like a match in a powder keg.

Halfway between the cabin and the filthy stable yard a girl crouched upon the ground. A long blacksnake whip wielded by a stocky, unkempt fellow with bare, hairy arms curled about her thinly clad shoulders. She cringed, protecting her face as best she could, but she didn't cry out. The whiplash cracked like a firecracker.

Don yelled. The stockily built man jerked his head around, just as the lash straightened out behind him for another blow. It trailed back over his shoulder, but without force. The man hesitated a moment, then bounded toward the house. Don's guess was that it was to get a gun.

Coldly furious, the puncher jerked loose his lariat, shook out the noose, and pushed forward the full length of the maguey just as the man reached the doorstep of the cabin. The small, neat noose settled over the fellow's head. Don dabbed on a dally. He set Blackie up, and the stocky man sat down hard in the dusty dooryard.

But Don had caught a Tartar. The man turned with the quickness of a cat, seized the rope with both hands and fairly shot to his feet. Don made no attempt to hold him. He let go the rope and leaped to the ground just as the fellow threw off the noose.

This time the man didn't break for the house. He picked up the blacksnake. The lash coiled around Don's neck and shoulders. It stung like fire. The puncher exploded an oath as he found himself caught in those serpentine coils. The heavy-set man gave a jerk which all but kinked Don's neck, and jerked him off his feet. The bully

shortened his grip on the whip, leaving two feet of the shot-filled butt as a club and charged forward.

A blow from that leaded whip handle might easily crush a man's skull. Don carried a six-gun at his thigh, but somehow he disdained to use the weapon against a man who carried no gun. He threw up one arm. Caught most of the force of the blow upon it. He felt sharp pain. Then numbness ran the full length of his arm. But, not pausing to throw off the whiplash, he drove a fist, hard as any rock, straight into the bearded man's jaw.

He was not a big man, this Don Fullmer; standing one inch short of six feet and weighing only a hundred and sixty pounds, but his weight was in all the right places, and his muscles like cords of steel. His punches had plenty of shoulder drive behind them.

The other man was not expecting the blow. His eyes glazed. He went down like a log.

The bearded rancher was not the only one who was swift of movement. Don freed himself of the whip coils and jerked the handle out of the fallen man's hand with a single movement before the fellow could recover from his daze.

Headstrong and twenty-two, Don cast the whip to one side, and unbuckled his own gun belt, which he hung upon the saddle horn. He had just time enough for a glance at the girl. She had raised up on one elbow, displaying a dirty, tear-streaked face. He saw that her eyes were brown or black, her hair long, loose and dark. Then he turned back to the man, who was beginning to sit up.

"Get on your feet, you damned bully, and take the lickin' that's comin' to you," Don invited hotly. "Any man who would strike a girl with a blacksnake, or anything else, ain't even human."

The man on the ground sized him up with small, cruel eyes beady with hate. He got warily to one knee, then to his feet.

"You asked fer it, stranger," he said hoarsely. "No man kin interfere 'tween me an' *my* daughter. I'll break you into bits."

He made a sudden lunging swing that seemed awkward, but wasn't. Don tried to block with his injured left arm, but it failed to respond and the cuff he got on the head made his ears ring.

His enemy was boring in now, swinging both arms like a power-driven machine out of control. Don gave ground. He had to. His left arm was useless. He blocked what he could with the other; ducked, and rolled with the punches. He realized that he had used poor judgment in giving the fellow a fair fight. He should have covered him with his gun when he had him down.

Try as he would the big man could not land a knockout. He had the puncher bleeding from the nose and mouth. One of Don's eyes was half closed, and bumps of variegated sizes and colors were swelling here and there over his tormented countenance. But the heavier,

older man was beginning to wheeze. Moreover, Don had been able to hook in a blow once in a while, and each time he succeeded it jarred his foeman's head back. Weakened him.

The man suddenly altered his tactics. He lunged in for a clinch, then brought up his knee sharply to the puncher's groin. Sick and paralyzed from the pain Don went down. The man drew back to kick the fallen stranger in the head with the toe of a heavy, hobnailed shoe. Don, unable to move, shut his eyes.

"Don't do it, Matt Dawson, or I'll blow your head off," came a girl's voice.

Don opened his eyes. The man's foot was back on the ground. He was gazing balefully at the dirty-faced girl, who now covered him with a double-barreled shotgun.

"Put down that gun, blast ye, or I'll knock yer ears off," Dawson roared.

"I'll not," the girl defied. "I'll kill you if you touch that man again —and I'll kill you if you ever touch *me* again."

"Why, you dirty little slut, I'll wring yore neck," the man mouthed. He started slowly for the girl. She backed away, keeping the shotgun extended before her, warning the man to stop or she would shoot.

Desperately Don fought to subdue the pain that paralyzed him. Through sheer will power he got to his feet. But he was too late. Dawson lunged suddenly, reaching out to strike the gun aside, just as the hammer fell.

There was a deafening roar. Matt Dawson went down. The girl opened her mouth, but no sound came. Her eyes were wide with horror. Then, suddenly, she dropped the shotgun and covered her face with her hands.

Too late Don realized what his youthful impulsiveness had brought about. He had tried to help an abused girl, and probably caused her to kill her own father. But he couldn't feel sorry for the man.

"Don't feel bad," he pleaded. "He had it coming for what he done to you."

The girl took her hands from her face. "I'm used to that," she said dully, "but I couldn't let him kill you. You—you took my part."

He glanced at her more closely. He had thought she was about fourteen. To his dismay he saw that she was at least four years older than that. Despite her tear and dirt-streaked face she was undeniably pretty.

"Is—is he dead?"

It was perfectly obvious Matt Dawson was not dead. Shock had momentarily closed his mouth, but now he began to groan and curse in frightful earnest.

"Shut up," Don told him. "If you think anything of your life you'll be quiet and let us do something."

There was dreadful fear of death in the man's eyes. He subsided with the meekness of a child. "I'm dyin'," he said in a voice which oozed self-pity. "She killed me. She allus meant to kill me."

"It's a wonder to me she didn't kill you long ago," Don said unsympathetically.

He bent to examine the wound. The man had caught most of the charge in the calf of one leg. There was a hole in the ground where the contents of one barrel had struck. But it was a ghastly wound at best. Don saw at once that nothing but amputation would save the man's life. But first the bleeding would have to be stopped.

"Look," he said to the girl, "we've got to get him inside, and dress this wound. Then I'll go for a doctor. Help me pick him up."

She responded gallantly. Don worked fast and desperately—not to save the man's life, but to prevent the girl from being a murderess. He fastened a tourniquet around the man's leg, just above the knee, and twisted it as tightly as was humanly possible. He then poured iodine into the wound, while Dawson screamed with agony, and finished by binding up the wound with strips which the girl tore from a sheet.

"How far is it to a town?" he asked.

"About twelve miles," she answered. "It's called Eden, and there's a doctor there. He's a young man, named Dr. Bland."

Something in the way she spoke the name caused Don to look at her quickly.

"If you bring that cur here I'll kill him," Dawson roared suddenly.

"There isn't another doctor in a hundred miles," the girl pointed out.

"Bring him then, I don't want to die," the man moaned. "I can't die."

Don signed for the girl to follow him outside, beyond earshot.

"I'll send this doctor up right away," he promised. "But even if your father dies don't you feel bad about it. It was self-defense. He had it coming."

"It doesn't matter much what happens to me," the girl said drearily. "I'm sorry you came along. He's got friends in this country, and you must get away at once. They'll be after you as soon as they hear about this. Please don't tell anybody what happened except Dr. Bland."

"You know this doctor?" Don asked.

She nodded. "He was good to me. His wife left him a few months ago, and he wanted me to come and keep house for him. My—my father gave him a whipping, and threatened to kill him if he ever spoke to me again."

"You poor kid," Don murmured.

She caught his sleeve as he started to go. "Promise me you won't stay here," she begged.

"Well, now, I'm sorry, but I can't do that," he smiled as best he could through his bruised lips. "You see, I've traveled a long ways

just to *get* here. I think I'm going to have a lot of business in this country."

"Who are you?"

"My name probably wouldn't mean a thing to you, but it's Don Fullmer. You see, I have a sister in this country who lost her husband a short time ago, and she's in some kind of trouble. Her name is Fanny Carlton. Do you know her?"

The girl's eyes opened wider. "I know her," she said in a voice that was scarcely audible. "Oh, I wish you had let him whip me till he gave himself out. He's done it often enough before. Then I wouldn't have got anyone else into trouble."

## *Chapter* 2

DON drew rein in a typical range town, and looked around for a doctor's sign. There was none in sight. He stepped onto the sidewalk in front of one of the saloons bearing the designation of *Cowhand's Delight*. The swinging doors opened and four men came out. One of the men seemed to dwarf his surroundings. He was a much bigger man even than Matt Dawson, but it was the arrogant force of his personality which impressed, even more than his huge bulk. The three men with him were obviously fawning sycophants.

The big man paused to light a cigar. He looked Don over with insolent appraisal.

"If there ain't the big shot of this range Eden then I'm a grandmother," Don thought, but he walked straight toward the big man.

"Pardon me," he said courteously, "but could you tell me where I can find the doctor?"

"What do you want a doctor for?" the big man retorted. "You look healthy—except for that face."

Don had promised the girl not to mention the shooting to anybody but Dr. Bland. The man's answer filled him with hot resentment.

"It's the doctor I want to tell my troubles to, not to you," he said curtly and started to pass. The big man, however, reached out a mighty paw and caught his arm. Whirled him around. The three satellites arranged themselves to be useful if their boss needed assistance. They grinned with anticipation.

"I asked what you wanted a doctor for," the huge fellow growled.

Don silently fought his temper. He had caused too much trouble already this day to want to make another mistake. "All right then," he said, "a man accidentally shot himself back there in the timber, and if he don't get a doctor he may bleed to death."

"Yeh? Who is he?"

"His name is Matt Dawson."

"How'd that happen? Where's he shot? You sure he shot himself?"

"He's shot in the calf of the leg. His shotgun went off by accident. I was just passing by, and I volunteered to come after a doctor. His daughter is taking care of him," Don said easily. What had happened was none of this bully's business, and he didn't mind misrepresenting matters. But the man was still holding his sore arm, and that irked. "Let go of my arm," he ordered curtly.

Instead, the grip tightened. "This looks kinda fishy to me," the big man said. "Matt Dawson ain't the kind to shoot himself. What happened to that face of yours?"

"Looks to me, Jud, like he mighta tangled with Matt," one of the satellites piped up. He was a ratty-looking fellow with a wisp of a mustache which probably matched his shriveled soul.

"It's worth lookin' into," said the man called Jud. "Tug, you fetch that doctor. Bunch, you go git Bruce Coates. I want him to go up there an' see what happened, an' to make sure that skunk of a doctor does a good job."

Two of the men took themselves away. Only the fellow with the mousy mustache remained on the sidewalk.

"Now, fella, what about that face?" big Jud demanded.

Don had had about all he could stand for one day, and the fellow's huge fingers digging into his sore arms was getting too painful. His free hand shot up suddenly, straight to the point of the man's jaw.

It was somewhat like hitting a tree. The man was too firmly rooted upon his immense legs to go down, but he was surprised. Surprised and hurt. He let go Don's arm. Stepped back. Then with a roar like an angry boar he swung a ponderous, hamlike fist.

Before he could strike, however, the other fellow hit at Don. The blow was ineffectual, but it added fuel to the puncher's temper. Don ducked under Jud's arm, swung half around and drove his fist into the little fellow's stomach. That one blow took the stiffening out of him. His legs bent and he folded up on the sidewalk.

Before his gigantic opponent could turn, Don's gun was out. He jabbed the weapon hard against the man's stomach. Jud's eyes goggled as he took a backward step. Don followed.

"I've had plenty from you," the puncher said in low, deadly tones. "I don't know who you are, but you're not telling me what to do. You try any more funny tricks and somebody'll be cleaning up a lot of offal from this sidewalk. That goes for your trained monkey there, too."

"You know who you're threatenin'?" the big man blurted. "I'm Jud Motley."

"I don't care if you're Jack the Ripper, you've got no earmark on me," Don snapped. "The more distance we put between us the better I'll like it, and it's your move first."

Motley glared for a moment, then grunted. "Git up from there, Eel. What's the matter with you—can't you take a little two-bit poke in the belly?"

The man called "Eel" got to his feet. Both men entered the saloon.

"Gee, mister, that's the first time anybody ever made Jud Motley back down in *this* town."

Don turned and looked into the awe-struck visage of a twelve-year-old boy. The lad had viewed the melee from behind a convenient whisky barrel.

"Tell me, son, where is Dr. Bland's office?" Don inquired.

"It was right down the street, but the doc is leavin' town. You'll probably find him at his house. It's that little green one yonder."

As though terrified lest he had said too much the boy scooted for the back of the saloon. The house he had indicated was by far the neatest one within range of the puncher's vision. He swung onto Blackie and trotted toward the house. He arrived just as the man Motley had dispatched was entering the yard. The fellow looked around doubtfully.

"Hey, you, I'll talk to the doctor," Don called out.

The man stopped. "You lookin' for trouble?" he demanded in an ugly tone.

"No; but your big boss was, and he got it," Don replied. "Come on now, roll your hoop."

"What's wrong here?" The door had opened and a man of short stature, with thick, black curly hair stepped into the yard.

"Jud Motley wants to see you, pronto, and you'd better grab yore instrument case an' git goin'," Motley's man said in an insulting tone.

"What's wrong with Motley?" Bland asked coldly.

"Nothin's wrong with him, but he wants you, and if you know what's good for you—"

"If Motley wants to see me he knows where I live," the doctor interrupted crisply.

"Bravo, Doc," Don applauded. "I'm the one who wants you anyway. I don't think we need this fellow any longer either."

"You'd better take this man's advice, Hopkins, and get going," the doctor said.

For a minute it appeared that Tug Hopkins might be going to make a gun fight of it. His fingers hovered over the butt of his gun; then he turned and hurried back toward the *Cowhand's Delight*.

"Well, what is it?" Dr. Bland inquired. "Your face looks like you might have met with an accident."

"It's not me, Doc. A fellow named Matt Dawson met with the accident. His daughter told me I was to fetch you."

The doctor's mobile face registered suspicion. "I refuse to have anything to do with Matt Dawson," he said coldly.

"As a matter of fact," Don said softly, "his daughter shot him."

"What?"

In simple, convincing words Don told what had happened.

"It was largely my fault, Doc, and I'm not dodging anything," he finished. "She asked me not to say anything to anybody but you, but I wasn't countin' on runnin' into trouble just by asking where you lived."

"I've finished practicing here, and it would serve Dawson right if I let him lie there and rot," Dr. Bland said bitterly. "I tried helping his daughter, too. Unfortunately, I'm not as husky as you are so I couldn't put up much of a fight."

"He beat you up, Doc?"

"And how."

"But how can a man like him get away with it? Ain't there any law in this country?"

"You've just had an exchange with Eden Law," Bland said grimly. "Jud Motley *is* the law. Dawson is just one of his many tools. The way that scoundrel treats Fern is a crying shame. I'm not the only one that has got into trouble trying to befriend her. There was a young couple over on Burnt Creek who were kind to her. It only caused her to be kept in and given more brutal whippings after Dawson found it out. I wouldn't say that had anything to do with it, but that young rancher is dead now. He was murdered."

"You wouldn't mind namin' him, would you, Doc?" Don asked softly.

"No. His name was Dick Carlton."

Here was a tie-up which Don was not looking for. Dick Carlton had been his brother-in-law. It was a letter from his sister Fanny which had brought him into the country. Although he had not seen Fanny for five years, and had never been in the country, he had chosen to come on horseback, unannounced; because at the time he had been working on a ranch only a week's ride removed. But if Jud Motley and Matt Dawson had anything to do with his sister's troubles he was glad he had arrived when he did.

"Well, I'll get my instrument case," Bland said. "You say you think the leg will need amputation?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Then I'll have to get somebody to give the ether."

"I'll do that for you, Doc," Don volunteered. "It won't be the first time."

"You, my friend, had best be making tracks out of here," Bland said. "As soon as Motley finds out how it happened he'll probably have you thrown into jail. And you'll be lucky to get that far."

"Just the same I'm going back. If he dies the girl will need a wit-

ness. You may need one, too, if Motley goes along to make sure you don't poison his pet."

Dr. Bland shrugged. Then minutes later he led a good-looking saddle horse out of the stable behind the house and joined Don at the gate.

"One of the tough things about this profession," he said, "is that so often you have to use your skill to keep alive some no-account skunk whose family would be a lot better off if he were dead."

## *Chapter 3*

THE two young men—Dr. Bland was under thirty—knew they were being followed by three men as soon as they left town. "It's Tug Hopkins, the Eel, and Deputy Sheriff Bruce Coates—and a sweet-scented trio they make," the doctor remarked. "No doubt Jud Motley will be along later."

"Do we have to stand for it?" Don asked.

"I guess we do," Bland shrugged. "Jud Motley happens to be the richest man in the country. He controls this town as well as most of the range."

"I'd like to protect that girl," Don said. "Looks to me like she's had a tough time."

Bland glanced at him curiously. "Tough is no name for it," he admitted. "But don't let your chivalry get the better of you. Don't forget: Motley is powerful."

"You say he's a cowman?"

"Cattle principally. He runs a large outfit, but he also dabbles in buying and selling. You see he gets the small ranchers in his debt, and then comes down on them for his money at the most inconvenient times. To cover they have to sell their stock at a low price before it is ready. Motley makes a double profit on every transaction. Here he owns the bank, the largest store, and the *Cowhand's Delight.*"

"I understand you to say that when he can't get his way any other way he don't mind a little murder," Don hinted.

"I didn't say Motley had committed murder," the doctor burred a little angrily. "At least it's never been proved. Five or six men have been killed in this country in the past three or four years. It's always just happened that they were men who were opposing Motley for some reason or other. Form your own opinions, but be sure and don't quote me."

"All right, Doc. So far as I'm concerned we never discussed the question."

As they rode on Dr. Bland related incidents of Matt Dawson's cruelty which made Don's hackles rise, but not once did the doctor say anything about his own relations with the Dawson girl, nor his own

matrimonial troubles. Don was inclined to like the little man, but he held his judgment in abeyance.

They made remarkably good time getting to Dawson's place, and Don had made even better on his journey down. Nevertheless, Dawson had lapsed into a coma from loss of blood.

The girl, Fern, met them at the door. Her eyes were wide with fright. Don watched her curiously to see how she reacted to the doctor's presence. She was obviously glad to see him, almost as though he were the only friend she had.

"You've had a bad time, Fern," Bland said kindly. "Do you think you can bear up under just a little more? I may need your help."

"I can stand anything, Doctor." she stated simply, and, someway, Don gained the impression that she could do just that. Her life had been a hard one, but it had taught her stoicism, and given her stamina.

The doctor passed on into the house to look at the patient. The girl's frightened eyes met Don's for just a moment, then she turned and followed the doctor.

Bland rolled up his sleeves and went to work. His face was grave when he finished his examination.

"You were right about the amputation, my friend," he said. "The leg will have to come off just below the knee. The trouble is he has lost so much blood that he may not be able to stand the shock. The only thing that will save him is a blood transfusion right after the operation."

The three men who had been following them had now crowded into the room. The deputy sheriff was a raw-boned individual with an ugly, bumpy face. He was dark enough to be part Indian.

"What's that about cuttin' Dawson's laig off?" the fellow demanded in a coarse, rough voice.

"It's got to come off if he wants to live," Bland answered.

"I don't know 'bout that," Coates growled. "Takin' a man's laig off when he can't he'p himself don't seem right to me. Fact is this hull business seems almighty queer. How come he shot himse'f, gal?"

"He didn't," Fern answered before either Don or the doctor could stop her. "I shot him."

"You shot him. I thought there was somethin' fishy 'bout all this. What did you go an' shoot yore own pappy for?"

"Because he was beating me with a horsewhip."

"Yeh? How come this stranger to be 'round here just then, an' where did he git them bruises on his face? Fightin' yore dad, wasn't he?"

"I was," Don replied to that.

"So he caught yuh makin' love, licked you, an' was floggin' the gal when one o' you shot him." The deputy licked his lips with satisfac-

tion. "If he dies that'll be a murder charge. I'm arrestin' you anyway right now."

"That man had nothing to do with it," the girl flared. "Dad was whipping me. The stranger tried to make him stop. Dad was going to kill him so I got the shotgun and threatened him. It went off. I don't know how."

"Yo're both under arrest," Coates said. "As fer you, Bland: don't yuh tech that laig. Everybody in the country knows you hate Dawson because he give you a beatin' when you tried to get her to come live with you with yore slick city ways."

Don expected the doctor to resent the accusation violently, and he was prepared to back him up. But Bland's expression didn't change.

"It might please you if Dawson did die," he said quietly, "but I'm not going to let it happen if I can help it. This leg has got to come off, and I've got to have Fullmer to administer the ether."

"You can't bluff me," the deputy snorted. "Why, you dirty little—"

The doctor had been fussing with his instruments. He straightened up suddenly with a syringe in his hand. "Shall I give you a shot in the arm to keep you quiet, or will you get out of here?" he shot out.

The deputy recoiled a step, and dodged through the open doorway as the determined little doctor followed him.

"Shut that door, and shoot anybody who tries to enter it, Fullmer," Bland said, and he seemed to mean it.

Despite the grim business at hand Don could admire the smooth skill with which the doctor handled his instruments. Several times he thought the girl was going to faint, but somehow she managed to keep on her feet.

"Good girl," Bland breathed at last when the cushion of flesh had been neatly sewed over the severed bone. "You had better lie down—" Before he could finish she had crumpled to the floor.

"Carry her into her room and hold these salts under her nose a minute," Bland said coolly. "I've got to put on the bandages."

Fern quickly responded to the smelling salts. Her eyes opened wildly and she tried to get up.

"Take it easy," Don urged, pressing her gently back to the bed. "Doc is almost finished. He says you are to rest."

"I'm not sorry I shot him," she blurted surprisingly. "It was an accident, but if it was to happen again I'd kill him."

"Nobody could blame you, but it won't happen again," Don soothed. She was on the verge of hysteria. He stroked her smooth white forehead with his hand, and continued to talk to her gently. Presently she relaxed.

"*You're good,*" she said suddenly, in a way in which he had never heard those words spoken before. Her sincerity made him blush.

"Oh, no," he disclaimed, "I'm anything but that. I reckon I'm not

much good at all. Just a ramblin' cowpuncher with a knack of getting into trouble."

To his relief the doctor appeared then.

"The fight's only half won now, Fullmer," he said. "He's got to have that blood transfusion. I asked one of those three rascals out there to volunteer, but they all refused. Either they want Dawson to die, or they are afraid it'll hurt them, the cowards. I think it's a little of both."

"You mean, Doc, that you want me to submit to the transfusion?" Don asked.

"It's one of us three, and I can do a better job if it isn't me."

"All right, Doc, I'm ready."

When Don was stretched out on the bed beside Dawson the three men crowded into the room to watch. They perhaps had never heard of a blood transfusion and they stood and gawked until the operation was finished. Deputy Coates at last recovered himself.

"Hey, look here, Doc, I'm aimin' to take that stranger into jail," he said.

"Not now you won't," Bland said crisply. "He's a sick man and under my care. You try interfering and you'll find yourself out of a job and in trouble."

Coates withdrew to talk things over with the other two. Presently he and the Eel headed toward town. Tug Hopkins remained.

"We'll be lucky if we don't have more visitors," Bland said. "Now you lay still and keep quiet. In a couple of days you'll be up and around, but until then you stay put. Miss Dawson and I will take care of you."

By accident Don chanced to glance at the doctor's waist, and to his astonishment saw his own gun belt strapped around it.

Don was, indeed, weak. It wasn't the first time he had been in danger, but things never had seemed to happen to him so fast. He was glad now that he hadn't written his sister when he was coming, or even if he were coming at all. There was no use to cause her needless worry. But he did wonder what kind of trouble she was in, and just how it was linked up with the people with whom he had already collided. He did know that her husband had been murdered, and that Fanny was widowed and broken-hearted. He had never seen his five-year-old nephew.

Don was asleep when Matt Dawson came out of the ether, but the man's howls and curses quickly awakened him. Only a little light entered the room through an open doorway. He could hear the doctor trying to quiet the man, then he observed that he was not alone in his room. Fern was standing near the foot of the bed. She was breathing hard.

"My foot!" Dawson shrieked. "You blasted saw-bones, what have you done with my foot?"

Don couldn't hear Bland's answer, but the rancher screamed: "You've cut it off! You done it a-purpose, damn you, so you could steal my daughter. But I'll show you. You tech that gal an' I'll kill you. I'll kill you anyway as soon as I git up from here. An' I'll whale every inch o' hide off her back."

"You'll not get up from here if you don't keep quiet," the doctor said sternly. "You've lost a lot of blood, and if you start the wound bleeding again nothing can save your life."

Dawson's howls became a whimper. The doctor's words had effect. He began to mumble that they were trying to murder him.

"That's where you're wrong, Matt," Tug Hopkins' jarring voice broke in with a harsh chuckle. "They're workin' like hell to keep you alive so yer gal won't be charged with murder. If you wanta play a good joke on 'em kick off."

"Look, Tug, don't you go 'way an' leave me alone with 'em," Dawson whined.

"I won't," the fellow promised. "Jud Motley himself will be up to see you soon."

When the doctor looked in later Don's eyes were open.

"Well, how do you feel?" Bland asked.

"All right, only I seem kinda weak and lightheaded."

"You're all right. Stay in bed a couple of days though. Even then you're going to be pretty weak for some time. I had to just about drain all the blood out of you," Bland grinned.

"Dawson all right?"

"You couldn't kill that brute with a club."

"Look, Doc: what about that girl? We can't leave her to the mercy of a man like—like her father."

Bland sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I'm afraid we can't do anything else," he said. "I tried. You see, I—I—had some domestic difficulty. In short, my wife left me. I knew what Fern was up against, for she had run away from home, and I asked her to keep house for me. Well, they made it tough for both of us. Dawson beat me up, gave Fern a beating, and Jud Motley completely stopped my practice. That's why I'm leaving town."

"Are you," Don asked, "taking her with you?"

"I'm still a married man," Bland answered.

"Well, by thunder, I'm not going to leave her here," Don said impulsively.

"You don't know what you'll be getting into, my friend," the doctor said as he arose. There was a sudden chill in his voice.

## Chapter 4

JUST before Deputy Coates departed for the first time he followed Fern into the kitchen. "Look here, sister," he said, "I want the lowdown on this shootin' business. Who shot your dad, you or that stranger?"

"I did. You already know what happened," she replied. Coates was a man who filled her with repugnance.

"Yuh said yore dad was lickin' yuh with a blackwhip. What for?"

"That's none of your business. We had a quarrel."

"Yeh. An' the reason was that you was makin' love to that young squirt in there an' Matt caught yuh."

"That's a lie!"

"No wonder Matt can't trust you," the man sneered. "First it was that young rancher on Burnt Creek, then the doctor, then this feller. Has he got a wife, too? If yuh must be that way why don't yuh give me a tumble?"

Fern was moving back, her hand groping for the shotgun. The fellow decided he had said enough. He got the Eel and they rode back to town.

Fern said nothing of that interview to the doctor when he talked to her later.

"Listen," he said, "I want you to go to bed and get some sleep."

"Is he—Mr. Fullmer, I mean—in any danger?" she asked anxiously.

"Not from the transfusion. He may be in plenty of danger in other ways, however. He had a row with Jud Motley the minute he hit town. Your father may feel some gratitude toward him, but I doubt it."

"He'll hate him. Oh, Doctor, you must make him leave here. And you must get away, too."

"What about you?" he asked softly.

"I guess there's nothing left for me but to marry Jud Motley," she said with utter despondency.

"Is *that* what the trouble has been? You mean to say that your father has been trying to make you marry that disgusting old brute?"

"He's been telling me every since I was twelve years old that some day I'd have to marry Jud Motley," the girl disclosed. "Two years ago Motley asked me to marry him. Since then I've not had any peace. You tried to befriend me and you know what happened. The Carltons were good to me, and now Mr. Carlton is dead. It's just no use. I've thought of killing myself, but I just can't do that."

"Look, Fern," the doctor said earnestly, "I'm going away from here. As a matter of fact I'm going back into the Navy where I served my interneship. But I'm going to help you. You hold out until I find some place for you. Before I go away I'll leave you some money."

"No, Doctor," she smiled wanly, "I'll not cause you any more trouble than I have. I know you're dreadfully hard up, and I won't take your money. But I am grateful."

"I can't understand how a girl like you can be the daughter of a man like Dawson," the doctor sighed. "Why, you don't even talk like him."

"Well, I got to go to school a little, and Fanny Carlton gave me books to read, and taught me how to pronounce most words correctly."

"That still don't explain it. Well, you take this powder and turn in."

Fern was amazed to find the sun shining when she awoke. Dr. Bland, knowing the mental state she would be in when darkness settled around her, had given her enough sleeping powders to make sure that she slept.

He had breakfast awaiting her. He greeted her with a smile. "Have a good night's rest?"

"I didn't expect to sleep a wink, but I did. How is—is the others?"

"Both are doing as well as can be expected. Our problem will be to keep Fullmer in bed until he gets some strength back."

"If only Jud Motley doesn't come here before he can get away," the girl said. But her hope was doomed to disappointment.

She had just finished breakfast and was clearing up the table when Motley rode into the yard. He was accompanied by Bruce Coates, and the Eel. They dismounted and approached the house. Jud Motley walked with heavy-footed determination. The Eel kept at a respectful distance behind the other two.

Dr. Bland met the men at the door.

"Dawson still alive?" Motley demanded without ceremony.

"He's alive. He's doing well and can't be disturbed," Bland answered. "Is there anything else you want to know, Motley, before you leave?"

"Why, you little whippersnapper, I'll go when I git ready," Motley said angrily. "I'm goin' to find out whether it was necessary for you to cut off Dawson's foot, or whether you done it for spite. Where's that feller who started the fight with him?"

"Fullmer is in bed. He saved Dawson's life by giving his own blood. Far too much of it. I've got to keep him in bed a week."

"I want to talk to him."

"You nor anybody else can talk to my patients till I say you can," Bland said firmly. "I know my rights and theirs."

"You're tryin' to cover up a crime, Bland, an' it ain't safe," Coates threatened. "This time I mean to investigate this here fight. I want to question Matt Dawson first. Then we'll talk to the gal an' that stranger."

The Eel had slipped around to the kitchen with the intention of getting into the room behind Bland's back. He came face to face with Fern.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"To see Matt. He's my friend."

"Get out of here," Fern ordered tensely.

Dr. Bland heard the dispute and stepped rapidly across to the inner door. Immediately Motley, the deputy sheriff, and Tug Hopkins, who had just come up from the stable, crowded into the room where Matt Dawson lay. The Eel beat a hasty retreat, but the doctor had been outmaneuvered. The men were in the room, and he had no power to eject them.

"How are you, Matt?" Motley asked.

The injured man emitted a heart-rending moan. "I'm a sick man, Jud. That damn' doctor cut my laig off. My own daughter tried to kill me; then she got that dirty little saw-bones to cripple me for life. But I'll git even with both of 'em if I live."

"That's all right, Matt," Motley soothed. "You've got friends who'll back you up. How come you got shot?"

"I was lickin'—"

"Wait a minute, Matt," Bruce Coates interrupted. "Yo're too weak to talk. I'll tell how it happened, and if I'm wrong you can say so."

"Yeh, that's right, Matt," Motley smiled.

"You caught that young stranger makin' love to Fern, didn't you? When you ordered him off the place he went for his gun and you hit him. Then, while you were givin' him the workin' over he had comin'. Fern grabbed the shotgun an' tried to kill you. Ain't that correct?"

"Sure," Dawson said. "That's *just* what happened."

"Then you'll sign this complaint chargin' the pair of 'em with attempt to commit murder? Tom Hinkle filled it all out legal."

"Look here," Bland shouted, "I protest. This man isn't fit to sign anything, and what you're asking him to sign is a lie."

Deputy Coates suddenly thrust a six-gun against the doctor's diaphragm. "Shut up," he snarled. "We've heard too much out of you."

Dr. Bland was still wearing Don's six-shooter. The Eel stepped forward with a grin and drew the weapon from the holster.

"Of course," Jud Motley said loudly, "we don't want to put a purty gal like Fern behind the bars, Matt. But there's a way out. What she needs is discipline. You ain't been able to handle her, but I reckon I kin. If she'll marry me this afternoon I'll guarantee no charges will be filed."

"That's fair enough," Dawson spoke up. "Gimme that pen. I'll sign."

With the doctor voicing impotent protests they steadied Dawson's hand while he signed his name.

"Now, young lady, you kin git ready to travel," Jud Motley said gruffly. "When you git to town you kin take yore choice—a marriage ceremony or jail."

"You can't take her away," Dr. Bland cried. "Her father needs her here."

"After she marries me she kin come back," Motley said.

"All right," the girl surrendered. "It doesn't make any difference what happens to me, I guess. I'll get ready."

"At last you're showin' some sense," Motley said triumphantly. "Nobody can buck me in this country an' git away with it."

The man was in great good humor. "Put that gun away, Bruce, an' let Doc look after his patient," he ordered. "Here, Doc, have a cigar."

"No, thank you," Bland refused icily. "Now, if I'm to be allowed to look after my patients get out of here, all of you."

The four men withdrew into the yard. Dr. Bland shut the door angrily and stopped for an instant by Dawson's bedside. "I ought to give you poison," he gritted, then knocked on the door of Fern's bedroom.

"Please don't talk to me, Doctor. I—I—can't stand it," the girl sobbed.

"Fern, I want you to know that I'll do anything I can to help you," Dr. Bland said. "Whatever happens you mustn't throw yourself away on Motley. If they send you to jail I'll get you out someway."

"No, no, please don't talk to me," Fern begged. "I've caused other people too much trouble already. I'm nobody. It doesn't matter what happens to me. The sooner I get it over with the better."

"I wish I could do something," the doctor said lamely.

"You can do something," a voice spoke from the doorway of the other bedroom. "You can keep her from leaving the house while I talk to these hellions outside."

Don Fullmer stood there, fully dressed. His face was white as chalk. When he walked he had to take each step carefully like an infant learning to walk.

"Here, you get back in bed, man," Bland cried. "You'll fall over the first thing you know. There's nothing we can do."

"Like hell there ain't," Don said grimly. "I'm not lettin' a girl like that throw away her life as long as I can lift a gun. If you can keep her inside I'll bloody well see that they don't come back in after her."

Don stepped across to where the Eel had left his gun, then appropriated Dawson's six-gun which hung on the wall from an antler. He buckled both belts around his waist. Drawing both weapons he stepped suddenly into the yard.

The four men were talking lightheartedly, but as they heard Don's step they turned to face the door. They found themselves looking into the muzzles of the two drawn revolvers.

"Hey, what the—" Deputy Coates blurted.

"Get on your horses and travel, hombres," Don ordered implacably.

"Miss Dawson ain't goin' with you, and we don't want you hangin' around."

"Why, damn your impudent soul, I'll have your ears for this," Motley mouthed furiously.

"Don't make the mistake of reaching for a gun then," Don warned. "On your way. And don't come back. I'll shoot the first man I see comin' into this clearing. I'll give you ten seconds to get on your horses, and if you ain't started then we'll have a real party."

Motley rode out of the clearing with his henchmen at his heels.

## *Chapter 5*

NOT until the four men were out of sight down the road did Don holster his guns and turn back into the house. He was amazed at his own weakness; every step he thought he would fall, and he was beginning to be nauseated.

Dr. Bland sensed his condition instantly, and sprang to his side. "Here, you young idiot, lean on me till you get back on that bed. Then stay there," he ordered.

Plop! Don struck the bed as Bland pushed him down as though he were a child.

"There's nothing anyone can do," Fern said drearily. "I can't have any peace till I do marry Motley, and if I don't I know that both of you will get into trouble."

"But marry that gorilla? It's impossible. Why, he's fifty years old, and he'd treat you like a slave," Don protested.

"I know it, but what am I to do?"

"Run away. Listen: I told you Fanny Carlton was my sister, and you said she'd been good to you. Go over there. I know she'll help you."

"No. I've done enough to her already. If it hadn't been for me her husband might not have been killed."

"Nonsense!" both men said in a breath.

"My—my father says it is so," she choked.

"Carlton," the doctor said as much to Don as to the girl, "had had trouble with Motley for a long time. He not only owns range that Jud wants, but he made the mistake of buying cattle from Motley's debtors at a fair price."

"That may be," Fern said, "but if I did go there I'd only bring Fanny bad luck. If it was only me I'd go to prison the rest of my life before I married that beast, but it's the only way I can see to save other people."

"Meanin' us?" Don asked quickly. "The doc ain't done nothin', an' I'm clearin' out of here anyway. Right now."

"But you're not able," she protested.

"Able or not I'm doin' it. Then you won't be tempted to give in just to save me. Call his bluff. He won't have the nerve to send you to jail."

"I'm sure he won't," Dr. Bland added. "People know how mean Dawson has treated you. If Motley comes out openly on his side it'll make him more unpopular than he is. But you, Don, are in no condition to travel."

"It would help me, Doc, if you'd saddle Blackie for me, but if you won't I'll manage that, too," Don said firmly.

Still voicing his remonstrance the doctor went out to saddle Don's horse.

"I don't want you to leave like this," Fern pleaded softly. "You're too sick to move."

"I'd have a hard time makin' 'em believe I was a sick man after the way I talked to 'em awhile ago," he smiled. "But I'll rest a lot easier if you'll promise not to give in to that skunk Motley—no matter what happens."

"All right. I promise."

"Then—then I'll be saying good by," he said. For a moment they looked into each other's eyes. Then, without either of them knowing how it happened, their lips met in a prolonged kiss. Fern uttered a strange little sound that was half sob when she drew away from him.

"Here's your horse," Dr. Bland called from outside the door. "You're foolish to go, but it's probably for the best."

"Good-by, Doc. Take good care of Fern," he said.

"You take care of yourself—outlaw," Bland said, and gripped his hand hard.

Burnt Creek, he had learned, lay on the other side of a mountainous divide from the Dawson place. He was not long finding a trail which led toward the top. It was all rough, timbered country, and every now and then a bunch of wild cattle would go crashing through the timber. Each time Blackie pricked up his ears like a true cow horse, but his rider was too weak to even investigate the brands. It was all Don could do to sit in the saddle.

He had ridden perhaps half a mile when he came out upon the end of a promontary ridge, and saw a wide, timbered basin below him. It was full of small canyons, crooked ridges and rounded knolls. A cattle range and a good one.

He paused to rest. Suddenly Blackie threw up his head and gave a soft whinny of interest. Following the direction of the horse's gaze the puncher's eyes fell upon a bunch of perhaps a hundred head of cattle and half a dozen men.

At the moment he thought nothing of it. Then something about the actions of the men caused him to take notice. He remembered this

wasn't the round up season. They had evidently stopped for a brief parley. Then they separated; four of the men continuing with the cattle, the other two turning back.

It was too far away to identify faces, but Don noted that one of the men who turned back was riding a slender, extremely light-colored bay with a strip running the full length of its face. Apparently these two were going Don's way. It occurred to him they might direct him to the Carlton ranch; then something warned him he had better not be asking too many questions — yet. He could at least follow the men over the divide.

It was only half a mile to a saddle in the divide and a dim trail running south along the top of the ridge. The puncher stopped his horse and gave a low ejaculation. There was a drift fence running along under the lee of the ridge on the other side. There was nothing peculiar about that, but it was a queer circumstance that the bunch of cattle he had seen had been driven through a gap in that fence — and the gap immediately repaired!

Don looked for fresh tracks of the two horsemen, but none were visible. His brows knitted into a frown. Fern had told him the Carlton range came as far as the top of that divide.

"If I wasn't so infernal weak," he murmured. "I'd have a look-see at the brand of those cattle." He knew the Carlton iron was an F D combined — standing for Fanny and Dick. Fanny had written a long time ago how they had worked the brand out.

But he was too weak to overhaul the cattle, and in no condition for a brush with four armed men, if the men were what he thought.

He thought about cutting the wire again, but decided that there probably was a gateway farther south. He was not mistaken. Just around a knob on the ridge was a deeper pass — and a padlocked gate. Also, there was the tracks of two horses going through it.

"H-m, Blackie, the plot thickens," the puncher soliloquized. "That hombre on the strip-faced bay has a key. And yet he cuts the fence half a mile from here to drive cattle through, and then fixes it up. How come?"

He got a pair of wire-nippers out of his saddlebag and with three swift snips severed the wires.

"We'll not stop to fix 'em either," he told his horse.

The trail fell away steeply, winding around between clumps of quaking aspens, sarvis, and occasional willow bushes. Don had just made a sharp turn when Blackie's ears pricked ahead. Gave him warning.

"Whoa, boy."

At considerable effort he leaned ahead in the stirrups and looked around. Suddenly he caught sight of two men in the bottom of a hollow at his left. They were on foot, and their actions bothered him consid-

erably — for a moment. Again they were too far away for him to see their faces, and their horses were not in sight.

Then he comprehended what they were up to. They were getting ready to set fire to the hillside, knowing that it would sweep north before the wind and completely destroy all signs where the cattle had been driven on that side of the divide. That a good section of valuable range would be wiped out didn't seem to bother them.

"By hunky, this has gone far enough," Don said angrily. Without bothering to dismount he drew a bead and planted a bullet directly between the two men.

The effect was all that he had hoped for. He laughed aloud. The men had not yet started their fire. They had made several little rows of dry grass and brush, and one of them was reaching for a match when the bullet threw pebbles into the tops of their boots. They bounded high into the air. One of them gave forth an unearthly yell.

They had no idea where the shot had come from. They whirled so rapidly looking for their unknown assailant that they bumped together. Don could imagine their language.

Wham! Another slug sang just over their heads and plunked into the hillside. They wasted no more time trying to locate the source of the shots.

"Run, you scalawags," Don ejaculated joyfully, and planted two more bullets at their heels before they disappeared in the thicker brush.

He had no particular desire for further conflict with them, and shoving the carbine back where it belonged he left the trail and took to the brush.

He rode at a walk all the way, and some five miles farther on he came to a well-kept ranch. Fanny's enthusiastic letters describing the ranch when she and her young husband had first located had been too explicit for him to doubt that this was the Carlton ranch.

Coming from the back way he naturally approached the corrals and outbuildings before he did the house. He noted with casual interest a number of horses that had just been turned into a corral. Then his eyes opened wide as a stable door opened and a light-colored bay with a strip face trotted out to join its fellows and indulge in a lusty roll to ease its back of the saddle itch.

The bay was the animal he had seen behind the cattle on the other side of the divide!

## *Chapter 6*

DON started to stop his horse, then decided to go on and make the best of it. He rode on around the buildings and approached the stable from the front. Two men were talking just outside the door. One

of them gave a start. He was a six-foot blond with hard blue eyes, a high, narrow nose and small, thin-lipped mouth. Not bad-looking, but of a type which Don didn't like.

The other was a boyish-looking fellow of about twenty with a lean, sun-tanned face, and dark eyes which looked up at Don with a friendly expression. He was the first to speak.

"Well, stranger, where did you drop from?" He cast a quizzical glance toward the sky as though to see if there were any more coming.

Don decided there was no use to dissemble. "I didn't come that way," he grinned. "Made my way over the divide from the Wolf Creek country."

The younger man looked at his companion as though waiting for him to speak. When the latter remained silent he went on: "That's interestin'. Just how did you git through our line fence?"

It seeemed to Don that his tone had grown faintly hostile. "Funny thing about that," he answered. "I was kinda lost on top of the divide when I come to a place where the fence had been cut and about half put up again. Then, on the way down, darned if I didn't jump a couple of hombres trying to set fire to the range. I didn't know what it was all about but I dropped some bullets around 'em an' you should have seen 'em run."

He was watching both men closely, and he saw an undeniable flush mount to the roots of the blond man's hair. The dark young fellow simply looked a little incredulous.

"Just what are you doin' in this country?" the older man asked ominously. "We ain't exactly pleased at havin' strangers ride over our range without an invite."

"You own this place?" Don drawled.

"No, I don't, but it's no damn business o' yours," the fellow flared. "If you're a spy for old man Motley —" He stopped and glowered ferociously.

"I wouldn't git all het up about it yet, Ralph," the younger man said. "Maybe he was tellin' the truth about somebody tryin' to start a fire. That would be like Jud Motley."

"Does this happen to be the Carlton ranch?" Don asked.

"It does, but what's that to you?" the man called Ralph retorted.

Before Don could reply a small boy with legs sticking straight out on the back of a fat pony came dashing in the other way. He was followed by a tall, golden-haired girl on a cream-colored gelding. The boy drew his pony to so sudden a stop that he bounced over the pony's withers and slid down along its neck to the ground, the pony obligingly lowering its head just slowly enough to save the youngster a fall.

"Bobby Carlton," the girl scolded, "you're going to break your neck if you don't learn to be a little more —" She noticed then that there was a stranger present and checked her speech. "Oh!" she said.

"Don't pay no 'tention to Bobby, Miss Virla," the young puncher said. "Ridin' is right in his blood. Muggins'll see that no harm comes to him anyway. See how he slid him down his neck?"

The girl looked straight at Don. She was tall, blonde, regal-looking; and she wore the very latest in modish Eastern riding garb. "Who is this man?" she asked frankly.

"Just what we've been trying to find out," the blond man answered. "He shore ain't explained himself yet."

Don had looked at the girl, and admired her as any normal young man would, but his eyes had gone to the youngster on the ground. It was the first time he had ever seen his nephew, and he felt a surge of affection. The way the kid rode showed that he was all right. He was recalled by the girl's imperious question.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"My name is Don Fullmer, and I'm looking for my sister, Fanny Carlton," he answered quietly, and was pleased to note confusion on the faces of the girl and the blond man.

"Oh, then you're my Uncle Don," Bobby yelled. "Mummy said you was coming."

"Yep, I guess I am, Younker," Don grinned.

"I — I beg your pardon for speaking that way," the girl said quickly. "I didn't know. Fanny will be delighted. She's been half expecting you for days. Get off and come in. The boys will tend your horse."

Don smiled and swung down, but he swayed from sheer weakness and had to lean against his horse to keep from falling. He turned pale.

"Why, you're ill," the girl said. "Boys, help him into the house."

"Thanks, I'll be all right in a minute. I — lost a little blood recently."

"Uncle Don, have you been in a gun fight?" Bobby asked eagerly.

"No, it was tamer than that. A man named Dawson over the hill got shot and he had to have a blood transfusion to save his life. I was handy, so they roped me in."

The chagrin which has chased across the blond man's face when he learned who Don was gave way to a puzzled, bewildered expression, which the others seemed to share.

"But what on earth were you doing over at Dawson's?" the girl asked.

"I just happened along."

"Excuse me. I must tell you who I am," the girl said, her hauteur nearly entirely gone. "I'm Virla Carlton, Dick's sister. I guess we both came here for the same purpose — to help Fanny. Only I've been here a couple of months."

"I'm glad to know you, and I'm glad you came to give Fanny a hand," Don said sincerely. They shook hands.

The clasp of Virla Carlton's hand was warm and feminine, and it

gave the puncher a decided thrill. Yet, strangely, the image of another girl flashed into his mind. There was a sharp contrast between this tall, well-dressed, self-assured girl and the ragged waif he had first seen cringing beneath Matt Dawson's blackwhip.

"You must meet the boys, too," Virla went on. "This is Ralph Churchill, Fanny's range boss, and that is Joe Perkins."

"Hi, Perk," Don grinned at the dark-haired youngster, who grinned back and shook hands.

Don offered his hand to Churchill, who accepted it after a moment's hesitation. "— meetcha," was the one word the fellow got out loud enough to be heard.

"Aw, come on in and see Mother, Uncle Don," Bobbby cried impatiently, grinning up at Don with lips parted wide to display two missing front teeth.

"I will," Don said.

"I'll tend yore horse," Joe Perkins offered.

"Thanks."

Bobby's short legs flew as he raced to the house to break the news.

"How is Fanny?" Don asked.

"I'm afraid you must be prepared for a shock. Dick's death naturally broke her all up, and financial troubles have about got her down. If she would only sell this place —"

Before she could finish Fanny herself appeared in the kitchen doorway. She was slimmer than Don had seen her since she was a gangle-legged kid of fourteen. Her shoulders, too, were slightly stooped, her cheeks a bit sunken — and yet she was not much past twenty-five.

"Don!" Fanny cried. The next moment she was in his arms. The tears were running down her cheeks.

He kissed her, but a wave of emotion strangled him and he couldn't speak.

Presently she released him, and stood back and smiled through her tears. "Oh, it's good to see you again," she said. "But how you've changed! Do you know that when I saw you last you were only a kid of sixteen? Now you're a man."

"Gee, Fanny, I feel like a whelp for not coming to see you before. I could have done it if I'd tried. But I couldn't make it for Dick's funeral, honest I couldn't."

"I know it, boy. But come on in, I've got so many things to talk about. Oh, have you met Virla? She is Dick's sister."

"She was good enough to introduce herself," Don said.

"She's been a great comfort to me," Fanny said, but to Don it sounded as if her voice lacked the proper note of enthusiasm.

"Mummy, Uncle Don's had a blood 'fusion," Bobby piped up.

"What do you mean, Bobbby? Why, Don, you are pale. Are you ill?"

"Just a little weak, sis. You see, I came into this country across the

mountains. I landed at a ranch over the divide here at just the wrong time. There was some trouble and a fellow named Dawson got shot in the leg. The doctor had to cut it off, and it was up to me to give him a blood transfusion," Don explained.

"If ever there was a lowdown, cowardly brute who deserved shooting, Matt Dawson is that man," Fanny said hotly. "Who shot him?"

"I suppose I'd just as well tell you the whole story," Don sighed as he permitted his sister to make him comfortable on a couch in the living room.

"That girl," Virla commented, "seems to have a positive genius for getting into trouble."

"The poor child has had nothing but trouble all her life, but it hasn't been her fault," Fanny defended.

"She said you had been kind to her."

"As kind as we could be," Fanny answered. "Dick heard how she was being abused and asked me to ride over and see her. I did, and we struck up a friendship. She got to coming over here when her father was away from home. I loaned her books and taught her to speak properly. I never saw anyone so eager to learn, and never anyone who could learn so fast."

"What happened?"

"Her father got to hear it and gave her a terrible beating. He made the wildest accusations against Dick, and Fern quit coming."

"But she ran away from home and went to keeping house for that young doctor down in Eden whose wife had just left him," Virla put in, in a way that seemed totally unnecessary.

"I'll not believe any harm of her," Fanny declared, "but I'll always believe Matt Dawson had something to do with Dick's murder."

"And now you say the girl will be arrested for attempted murder unless she marries old Jud Motley?" Virla asked Don.

"It seems so, unless they back down on their bluff. And if they arrest her I suppose they'll be after me."

"Oh, Don! This is dreadful," Fanny cried.

"It may be just as well to let it come to a showdown," Don remarked. "If they arrest that girl, and it comes out how she's been abused it certainly won't help Motley and Dawson. I don't believe they dare to do it. But if they do I mean to see her through."

"At least the girl never seems to lack for masculine defenders," Virla remarked dryly.

## Chapter 7

DON was alone with his sister at last.

"Just what's the trouble here, Fanny?" Dan asked finally.

"It's just a case of one man's greed," she answered. "Jud Motley's. He has far more than anyone in the country now, but he wants it all."

"Trying to break you?"

"Yes. You see he never dreamed of anyone having the enterprise Dick had. Motley has cattle range above here, and there are a lot of little ranchers below us. For years Motley has preyed on those people, getting them in debt to him, and then doing something so that they couldn't pay their bills. The only reason he didn't foreclose was because it was cheaper for him to make them raise the cattle and take the stock away from them than it was to take over the ranches himself.

"Then Dick came in and got possession of this range between Burnt Creek and the divide. When we put up our drift fences it drove a wedge between Motley and the people he had victimized. Dick had quite a lot of money as you know, which he inherited from his grandfather."

"By the way," Don interrupted, "did his sister come in for some of that, too?"

Fanny smiled. "Are you getting fortune-hunting ideas already? I'm afraid you're a little late if you are. Ralph Churchill has the inside track there."

"No, I just wondered."

"As a matter of fact Virla did inherit just as much as Dick did. She was wise enough not to put it in the cattle business so she is a pretty wealthy girl."

"I see. Go on."

"Well, when these people had to sell their young stuff to pay Motley, Dick either loaned them money or bought their stock at a fair price. Motley saw himself losing money so he set out to break us. When other means failed he had Dick — murdered."

She seized a sofa pillow and held it to her face for a moment, while her brother watched her with infinite compassion.

"Just how does it stand now?" he asked presently.

"We've had a lot of bad luck. Somehow, nothing seems to go right since Dick died. Motley has offered to buy me out at a ridiculous price, and he says if I don't take it he'll see that Bobby and I walk out with nothing but the clothes on our backs."

"He does, does he?" Don gritted.

"Virla thinks I ought to sell and save what I can. If it was just me perhaps I would. But there are these ranchers below here. Once Motley gets this wedge out of the way he'll break every one of them. Not only will we not get any of the money Dick loaned them, but they'll be

homeless and lose everything they've worked so hard for. But the main reason I have for staying on is that almost the last thing Dick said to me was not to let these ranchers down if anything happened to him. I think he had a premonition."

"What does Virla say to that?" Don asked.

"She says things have altered, and that I can't be responsible for them. She certainly has logic on her side. But you know, Don —" she smiled faintly — "we Fullmers have always been a foolish lot."

"Yeh, I know. Always thinking we have to keep our word and shoot square with people. Principles are a darned nuisance sometimes."

"Just the same, I'm glad we have them. If it wasn't for Bobby —" She bit her lip and stopped.

"Tell me something, Fanny: are you losing many cattle?"

"I don't know. The boys are afraid we are. Dick always suspected Matt Dawson of stealing cattle. He has the best opportunity. Now Ralph Churchill says he suspects a man by the name of Ad Tolson. He's a harmless old fellow, I thought. Chops wood for a living. I used to send things up to his cabin to eat, and papers and magazines. Then I found out that he served a twenty-year sentence in the penitentiary for murder, and they say he was a cattle thief before he was sent up. Ralph thinks he is lookout man for a gang of thieves."

"H-m. Just how sure are you, Sis, that this Churchill chap is on the up-and-up?" Don queried.

"Ralph? Why, I'm sure he's all right. He's been with us five years. Dick trusted him implicitly."

"Well, I just wanted to know. What about Perkins?"

"Joe is all right. They are the only regular crew we have. When we need extra help we hire some of the ranchers from below."

"Churchill is foreman, I understand."

"Yes," Fanny said hesitantly. "There's something we'd just as well get straight, Don. You're my brother, and if you stay here you'll be in a different position from the other men. Ralph knows the country and the business, and I'd want him to keep on as foreman."

What would she think, he wondered, if he told her what he had seen that afternoon? He was sure in his own mind that Ralph Churchill was a double-crossing thief, but what purpose could be served by telling Fanny that? Probably she wouldn't believe it. She would say Don was mistaken, since he had not seen the man's face. He resolved to hold his peace, but that would not prevent him from keeping an eye upon Mr. Churchill.

"I get you, Sis," he said. "You're afraid I'll try to exercise authority and gum up the works. I'll promise not to interfere, or to give a single order."

"I hoped you'd understand," she said. After all, you're much younger than Ralph, and you haven't had his experience."

"You're a good, sweet sister," he said, and kissed her. "Now I think I'll roll in."

Next day he was out at the corrals with Bobby soon after noon when the loose horses came in for shade. Among them was the strip-faced bay.

"Good-looking horse that," he said casually.

"That's Strip. He used to be my daddy's horse, 'cause he was the bes' in the cav — cavvyyard," Bobby said, stumbling over the hard word, and grinning triumphantly when he mastered it. "Now Ra'f rides him."

"How do you like Ralph, Bobby?"

"I do' like him. He's too bossy," the youngster said. He placed his small fist confidently in his uncle's hand. "I ruther you be boss,"

"I'm afraid I can't be that," Don said.

Don sat upon a wagon-box in the sun while Bobby squirmed and talked. Presently Virla came out to them.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked.

"Much better," Don said. "Tomorrow I'll be able to ride."

"I'm glad of that. You've talked with Fanny about the business?"

"A little."

"I hope you can make her see that it's to her interest, and Bobby's, to sell out for what she can get. They won't have a thing if they stay here. I have some money, but I hardly see how Fanny can expect me to put up for her if she persists in losing what Dick left her."

Don wanted to say: "Miss Carlton, why don't you go home and mind your own business?" But after all she had as much right there as he had. Instead, he said: "I'm not familiar enough with Fanny's business to attempt to advise her."

"At least you won't put any straws in my way in trying to get her to do what is best?" she wheedled.

"Oh, no, certainly not," he promised. He knew there could never be any doubt in this imperious girl's mind that she knew what was best at all times.

"I'm so glad," Virla gushed. "And I do hope you won't get into any trouble because of that awful Dawson girl."

"Did you ever meet her?" he asked.

"No, and I have no desire to."

He changed the subject. "Do you happen to know where young Perkins was riding yesterday?"

"Why, yes, I do. He was fixing a stackyard fence in sight of the house all day. Why did you want to know that?"

"Just curiosity, I guess."

So Joe Perkins had not been Churchill's companion. Don was glad of that, but it left the identity of the other firebug a mystery.

## Chapter 8

HAD it not been for pressing worries over Fanny's affairs and what might be happening to Fern Dawson, Don could have enjoyed himself at the Carlton ranch. He and Fanny were getting back to the old familiar footing, and he was delighted to see a bit of color coming back into her pale cheeks.

Since no effort had been made to arrest him he decided Jud Motley had pulled in his horns. He was quite sure that word of who he was had reached Eden before this.

Then one afternoon three men rode into the yard and inquired for Mrs. Carlton. Don had never seen them before, yet one of them looked vaguely familiar.

"Fanny's in the house, gentlemen," Don said. "Will you come in?" He held the door open while the men walked inside. They twirled their battered hats awkwardly. Evidently Fanny's pretty living room was something finer than they were used to.

Fanny came in from the kitchen. There was flour on her hands. "Oh, how-do-you-do," she greeted. "Won't you be seated? This is my brother — Mr. Edwards, Mr. Stapley, and Mr. Vanwormser."

"We heard you had a brother here," remarked Enos Edwards after the introduction had been acknowledged.

"Is that so? Where did you hear that?" Fanny asked.

"Vanwormser was down in Eden the other day an' heard it. It's all around that he had some trouble with Matt Dawson and Jud Motley."

"An' I might say that I heard Deputy Coates say he was lookin' for you," Vanwormser put in.

"Don, these are some of the men from lower down that I told you about," Fanny said.

"Oh, it's your scalps Jud Motley is after," Don said.

"He's robbed us for years, and now he wants to make Mrs. Carlton sell out so he can completely rub us out," Edwards answered. "That's what we come to see about. Van here says it's around town that you aim to sell."

"I certainly don't," Fanny said. "Not unless Motley pays us all a fair price."

"We're glad to hear that, ma'am," Edwards said. "We know that Motley can put the pressure on you, but you're all that stands between us an' bankruptcy. Your husband gave us his word not to let us down."

"And what did you give him in return for that promise?" a cool voice inquired from the doorway. Virla had come in unseen.

"Why, I — I — nothin' in pertickler. We — we borrowed money from him, but if Motley ruins us how can we pay it back?" Edwards answered, visibly flustered.

"If you ask me I think it's not very manly of you to hide behind my sister-in-law's skirts, knowing that she will lose everything if she tries to protect you," Virla said.

"We've got women an' kids, too," Jack Stapley put in. "Jud Motley had your brother murdered, miss —"

"I don't believe that. Dick was murdered by cattle rustlers."

"We just as well talk plain, Mrs. Carlton," Edwards said. "This young woman was down in Eden the other day havin' a talk with Jud Motley an' Tom Hinkle, an' right away the talk got around that you was sellin' us down the river. If you are mebbe we can't blame you, but we'd like to know it."

Don glanced at Virla. Her color was high, but her eyes were full of wrath. "What if I did go to Eden?" she flared. "Is that any of your business? As a matter of fact I found Mr. Motley a very fair man."

"I may as well tell you," Fanny said, "that Jud Motley has offered to buy me out, and to take over your paper at seventy-five per cent of its value. That alone would amount to twelve thousand dollars for me. I refused it. I'll make no deal with Motley unless he'll pay all of us full value for our property."

"Fanny, you're a fool," Virla cried out, enraged. "Don, can't you make her understand that if she doesn't take this she'll get nothing."

"More power to her if she don't," Don said inelegantly.

"Then you're as big a fool as she is," the girl flared. "But I've still got something to say about Bobby. If you don't take Mr. Motley's offer, Fanny, much as I hate to do it I'll go into court and have you declared unfit to look after his interest."

"You wouldn't dare, Virla," Fanny cried.

"Wouldn't I? I've already talked to Attorney Hinkle," Virla shot out.

"Well, of all the meddling damned fools —" Don blurted. He got a glare of hatred from the girl.

"Be still, Don," Fanny said calmly. "Virla is only doing what she thinks is right. I'd hate to fight you over Bobby, Virla, but if I have to I'll do it. I'd rather rear him in poverty than to have him find out one day that he was the son of a double-crosser."

"Excuse us," Enos Edwards said hastily. "Didn't know we'd be gettin' into a family row." The men rose. Fanny followed them to the door. Told them not to worry.

Don and Virla were left alone in the room. "And you'd make paupers of your sister and her child for those *farmers,*" she said bitterly.

"I admit they ain't very pretty," he said. "I'm sorry I spoke the way I did. Lord knows you've as much right here as I have, but someway I could never stomach the idea of letting a bully walk on me."

The girl was somewhat mollified, but there was still a decided jut to her short rather heavy chin, the only irregularity to an otherwise

perfect face. "I've met Mr. Motley, and although I know he's pretty uncouth I don't believe he's as bad as they say he is. Attorney Hinkle told me of many charities which Mr. Motley helps on the side."

"Would you change your opinion of him if you knew he was responsible for your brother's murder?"

"Of course. But I don't believe that. The man I think killed Dick is this old ruffian Ad Tolson."

"And the fellow who told you that is Ralph Churchill, I take it. And he's the one who sent you to see Motley's lawyer, ain't he?"

"As a matter of fact he did suggest it. Frankly, Ralph seems to be the only one around here with good judgment."

Don got up and went out to avoid quarreling.

The next morning found Don once more in the saddle, the first time in four days. He was pretty much recovered, although still weak.

"Let me ride wiff you?" Bobby pleaded. "Mum says you oughtn't to ride far anyway."

"Nope, younker, you stay home an' run the ranch," Don smiled.

"Don't overdo," Fanny said. "And take Joe Perkins with you. He'll show you the range."

"All right, Sis, but don't worry if I don't get back for a few days. I may decide to ride over and see how Dawson is getting along."

Ralph Churchill was still at the yards when Don and Joe Perkins left. His quietly cynical attitude toward Don had not changed. He didn't like his employer's brother and was at little pains to conceal the fact.

"Does Churchill ride alone much?" Don queried.

"Darn near always. Gives the rest of us strict orders what to do, an' then he does the extra ridin'. Don't spare himself none either," Joe answered.

They rode for several miles, chatting of unimportant things. Perkins stopped suddenly. "See them cows?" he asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Jud Motley's cows. On our range. Both ears cut half off. That's Motley's mark."

They rode around and got a look at the brand on the animal; a big J M on the right ribs. The cows were spooky; unsure of themselves.—

"There's our trouble," Joe said in a low voice. "Them cows didn't make a breach in our drift fence by themselves. More an' more of 'em findin' their way in here. It means feed'll be dang scarce come fall, but that ain't the worst. No tellin' what'll happen when Dutch Schiller brings in about twenty o' them hard-ridin' Motley punchers. We won't have a chance."

"Who is Dutch Schiller?"

"Motley's foreman. You never saw any of Motley's real badmen yet. Tug Hopkins an' that cuss they call the Eel are small fry. Saloon bums.

Schiller's men never ride with their hands in their pockets."

As they rode on they encountered more and more J M cattle.

"Looks to me," Don remarked, "that there's more J M cattle in here than there is F D's."

"By golly, I'm worried," Joe Perkins said. "I never saw nothin' like this before. Motley's movin' in on us with a vengeance. I believe we'd better turn back an' report to Churchill."

"You go ahead," Don said. "I think I'll just project around a little."

"All right if you say so. But be careful. I wouldn't care about runnin' onto any of Schiller's men cuttin' a fence too sudden."

Don rode on alone.

He struck the south drift fence and turned west. At times the brush was so thick that he had to make wide detours before he could come back to it. He was one of these detours when he heard voices, yells rather, as a bunch of cattle were being, he surmised, whooped through a gap in the fence. Quite by accident he had come upon some of Motley's men driving cattle through the cut drift fence.

He hadn't seen them yet, nor they him. The cattle were being chased down a gulch which the fence crossed a couple of hundred yards distant. Don't fighting instincts were aroused. Gently easing his carbine from the holster he continued on until he struck the fence. He dismounted, left Blackie in the brush and made his way back along the fence line on foot until he reached a place overlooking the gulch.

He paused. The cattle had disappeared, and four tough-looking individuals had stopped to light cigarettes. The fence was down for several rods, but the men had not ridden through.

Don hesitated. These men were likely of different caliber from the two firebugs he had fired on before. They were close enough that he could see their faces, and they would probably fight. But it burned him up to let them get away with it.

If he walked out on them he would certainly get the worst of it. They were breaking the law and they knew it. He couldn't shoot them without warning. One of the men was directly facing him. He was a small, wiry-looking fellow whose teeth were flashing in what Don took to be a triumphant grin. Don hated to do it, but he needed evidence at the scene of the outrage. He drew a careful bead at the center of the head of this man's horse and pulled trigger.

The horse dropped at the report of the gun. It was probably dead before it hit the ground. Only by the fastest movement Don had ever seen a man make, did the rider escape being caught. Someway the man sensed which side the animal would fall on, and he got his foot out of the way. He landed on his feet like a cat.

That shot out of a clear sky, and the accompanying splat of smashed bone completely stampeded the J M riders. Cigarettes dropped from slack mouths and spurs drive home as they thought only of get-

ting away from there. Horses plunged madly beneath the cruel rowelling, but one man checked his mount just long enough for the man on the ground to grab the horn and swing on behind. Don sent two more bullets winging after them before they disappeared from sight.

It was evidence he was after. He hustled down to the dead horse and removed the saddle and bridle. He kept a watchful eye out against the return of the enemy while he toiled back to his horse with the burden. He was sure they would be back when they got over their panic, but he wouldn't be there. And by acting promptly he had got what he wanted.

He mounted Blackie, and with the extra saddle on the horse's rump got away from there. His first thought had been to take it back to the ranch, but he changed his mind. That could wait. He wanted to know how Fern and the doctor were getting along. He stopped and hid the confiscated articles in a thicket, and headed for the gate on the top of Wolf Creek Divide.

## *Chapter 9*

DON'S bullets precipitated a stampede which did not stop until the four riders were half a mile away and well protected by timber. Then they paused, and the man who had lost his horse emitted a flow of profanity which lasted for five minutes, while his companions listened with complete sympathy and understanding.

"Who the hell yuh reckon done it?" one of them asked when at last the man had to pause for breath.

"I don't know, but, by Gawd, I'm goin' back there an' find out," the fellow gritted. "Lemme have yore horse, Rick; I'm goin' back an' git that——"

"Shore, Harry," said the man in front, "but mebbe there's more than one."

"Hell, I've got to git my saddle," Harry Tezak said. "An' I wanta know who done it. That was my private horse, an' worth a hundred and fifty dollars. When I find the cuss who killed it—" He went off into another tirade of profanity.

"How come anybody there anyway?" an older man demanded plaintively. "I thought that cuss Churchill was gonna see that nobody was up this way when we're workin'."

"Aw, Churchill is just a loose wire," Tezak said scornfully. "Only way he gets anywhere is by makin' a play at a couple of women. You know how he mussed things up the other day. Now he don't dare to move because he's afraid he was recognized by Mrs. Carlton's brother — say, that hombre has been usin' a gun plumb promiscuous ever since

he landed here, even throwin' down on the big boss himself. I'll bet he's the so-and-such who killed my horse."

"Guess you're right," Tezak said. "Come on, what're we waitin' for? When we git close enough, Rick, you slide off an' take it on foot. When you've all had time to git ready I'll ride straight in on Rick's horse —"

"An' git it killed for me," Rick supplied.

"That pelican had better not be shootin' at horses this time. If he opens up on me you can spot him, some of you."

It was evident that Harry Tezak did not lack courage. He was, in fact, considered the fastest and smartest of the crew of gunmen Jud Motley had hired to help him dominate the county. And Rick Mays was not far behind him.

The two older men, Bill Grubb and "Coop" Hires, rode away to help surround the horse-killer; well pleased to let the younger fellows take the most risk. They had not yet reached their posts, however, when they heard Dick Mays shouting. They arrived only a little behind Tezak, who was gazing down at his stripped horse and cursing a blue streak.

"If I didn't know better I'd say it was a lousy Injun who done this," he ranted. "If there was a Chinaman's chance of ketchin' him —"

"There ain't," Bill Grubb said laconically. "Not unless you wanta ride down to the Carlton ranch. You kin bet the feller is high-tailin' down there right now with that saddle. That, an' this dead hoss, is shore proof that we was cuttin' fences an' shovin' cattle across."

"The feller shore cut himself an ace right in the middle o' the deck," Coop Hires agreed.

"He'll find it's the deuce before he's through with it," Tezak gritted.

"This here is purty serious," Bill Grubb said. "It might block all the boss's plans. Two weeks more an' we'd have enough cattle in here to demand a roundup. Then, when we had a thousand head we could shove 'em on down among them nesters' cattle an' plumb raise hell."

"Yuh think Jud oughta be told?" Rick Mays queried.

"I know dang well he had. At least Dutch should know about it."

"An' meantime I'm left afoot, while that hyena takes my saddle an' gives me the horse-laugh," Tezak said bitterly. "That walloper has ordered himself up a coffin an' don't know it."

"Well, we're wastin' time here," Mays said. "Git yore foot outa that stirrup so I kin git on. I'll ride behind. Yo're so hot you'd burn the hair offa my horse's rump."

Dutch Schiller was a blondish man of forty with a face which neither wind nor sun could tan any darker than an angry red. His corn-colored mustache was ragged and unkempt, and his expression that of a man to whom life was serious, and levity a crime. His ice-blue eyes popped with anger when Mays and Tezak made their report. The two older punchers had excused themselves and gone upon other business.

"Maybe you couldn't help gittin' the horse killed, but you didn't have to run away and let him steal the saddle," Schiller rasped. "You could have spread out and got the feller. I thought you two claimed to be gun-fighters."

"I'll git him," Tezak breathed.

"Rot! You don't even know who it was. Anyway, you've done one of two things: Either we have to call the whole thing off, or else act strong an' sudden. I'm goin' to town."

"Me, too," Tezak said. "I gotta git me a new saddle."

"Which would be fine headwork, goin' into town to buy a new saddle about the time this bozo shows up there with your old one."

"You expect me to ride bareback?" Tezak wailed.

"You can ride the cook's shell down to the ranch an' pick up an old one there," Schiller said. "I think we'll stop on Wolf Creek an' see how Matt Dawson is gittin' along."

"Reckon I'll shag along, too," Rick Mays said. "I need some new Levi's. We might kinda cheer old Matt up. Tough, him losin' a laig thataway. Wonder how the gal feels about shootin' her old man? She's a purty piece."

Dutch Schiller transfixed the puncher with a beady eye. "There's a lot of young squirts like you who would like to hang around that gal, but it ain't healthy. Jud Motley wants her for himself."

"Yeah, I know," Mays grumbled.

"What Jud wants I aim to help him git," Schiller said. "Why he wants a vicious little vixen like that who hates his guts I don't know, but that's his business."

"He's human, I guess," Tezak remarked.

"Maybe. If you ask me there's another reason," Schiller said.. He did not, however, volunteer any opinion.

## *Chapter* 10

FERN was on her way to the chicken coop with scraps from the table when Don rode into the yard. She had asked him not to come back, but in spite of that her face lighted with involuntary pleasure. She set the pan of scraps on top of a post and hurried to greet him.

"Don," she cried, "what are you doing here?"

"I was on my way to Eden so I thought I'd drop in and see how your father is getting along," he said quite untruthfully. "How is everything?"

"We're not in jail yet," she smiled faintly.

Just then Dr. Bland came to the door. "Hello there, cowboy," he shouted. "What are you doing back here?"

Don and the girl walked back across the yard. Don shook hands with the doctor. "Since you folks are still out of jail I thought I'd be safe," Don grinned.

"I can't understand it," Bland said. "Everybody knows that Jud Motley is out to have your sister's ranch, fair means or foul. Haven't the officers been after you, or have you kept out of sight?"

"No, and I'm wondering. Motley undoubtedly knows who I am by this time, for I had a little run-in with some of his men on my way over. Haven't you seen that big-feeling deputy any more?"

"You hunting for him?" the doctor asked "If you are you'll likely meet up with him soon. They gave Fern three days to make up her mind, and the time is up."

"You mean they still threaten her with imprisonment unless she marries that old windbag?" he demanded.

"That's it. Motley didn't come back himself, and neither did Coates. They sent a long hungry weasel of a lawyer, named Tom Hinkle. Now you're back the situation is just what it was," Doc said.

"Maybe I'd better give up and have it over with after all," Fern said wearily. "I can't understand at all why he should want to marry me."

"Oh, no, you don't," Don said quickly. "It's all a big bluff they're trying to work. I'm coming to the conclusion that Motley is all bluff, and he's going to get called."

"Well, come in and let's talk about it," Bland invited.

They went into the kitchen. They had secured an elderly woman named Mrs. Barry to help nurse Matt Dawson and she was now with the sick man. In the kitchen they could talk without being disturbed. Don told them what had happened on the other side of the divide.

"It doesn't sound like a bluff to me," Dr. Bland said. "But at least you have got something to fight back with now. It isn't much but it may be a start. Motley has a lot of enemies in Eden, even though they don't dare say much. Unless the jury is handpicked a lot of men would be glad to send some of Motley's bullies over the road, and they'd be more than glad to get something on Motley."

"If I only knew that Motley was stealing F D cattle I'd really have something to chew on," Don said. "The story is, of course, that some old jailbird by the name of Tolson is responsible. I don't believe it. When a man is desperate enough to do all the things Motley is doin' that man is either a fool, or almighty scared of something. Nobody has accused Motley of being a fool."

"That's an angle I hadn't thought of," Bland admitted. "But what should Motley be afraid of? He wants your sister's ranch so he can break all the ranchers on Burnt Creek. That will give him a solid block of range on both sides of the mountains. Because he can bully people with impunity he goes after what he wants. He's taken a no-

tion to get himself a young wife, so he uses the brutality of Fern's father to force Fern to marry him."

"I still think Motley is afraid of something," Don insisted.

They were still talking when there came a knock on the door. An instant later the whole aperture was filled by a huge figure of a man with a short, iron-gray beard. The man's shoulders were slightly stooped, but his whole appearance was that of tremendous strength and power. He had the thickest, most powerful wrists Don had ever seen. His eyes were gray and kindly. He wore faded overalls and hobnailed shoes and had apparently come on foot.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am," he said in a low, slow voice, "but I heard a rooster crowin' here the other morning and I come down to see if maybe I could buy some fresh eggs. Like to get 'em regular if I could, a dozen every other day. I'll pay you whatever you ask."

"Why, I—why, I—" Fern stammered. "We do have eggs for sale, but we've always taken them to town. I don't know if—if my father—"

"You Matt Dawson's girl?" the man interrupted.

"Yes."

"How old are you?" he asked surprisingly.

"I'm nineteen, but why should you ask that?"

The man didn't answer. He looked the girl up and down. His face twitched. Dr. Bland stepped forward.

"Who are you, and why should you be so interested in Miss Dawson?" he demanded sternly.

"My name is Tolson," the man said slowly. "I chop cordwood for a living about four miles from here."

Don looked at the man keenly. This was the man Ralph Churchill had accused of being a cattle thief. He was the man who had spent nearly twenty years in prison for murder.

"Had you heard that we had to amputate Dawson's leg the other day?" Bland said.

"No, I don't get around much. What happened?"

"He met with a gun accident. Oh, nothing mysterious about it," Bland added hastily as the man seemed startled. Tolson seemed unable to take his eyes off Fern's face.

"I don't know about letting you have the eggs regularly, but I can let you have a couple of dozen now anyway," Fern said. "If you'll sit down I'll get fresh ones out of the coop."

The man seated himself awkwardly and watched the girl depart. "I've heard," he said to the two men, "that Dawson abuses her."

"The man is a brute," Bland answered. "He was whipping her with that whip hanging there when he got shot. Don Fullmer had something to do with it. He tried to interfere."

"What was he whipping her for?" Tolson asked.

"The main reason he is trying to force her to marry Jud Motley."

Tolson drew a trembling hand across his face. "Do you men know that she is not Dawson's daughter?" he queried.

"What?" they chorused.

"She thinks she is," Bland added.

"I knew Matt Dawson nineteen years ago. He wasn't even married at that time," the man stated.

"My God, Tolson, if this is true it accounts for a lot of things," the doctor said. "Can you prove that?"

"No. Did you say Jud Motley is tryin' to force her into a marriage?"

"He is. If she don't marry him she may have to go to the penitentiary because Dawson swore to a lie about the way he was shot."

Don had been watching the man closely. He saw that so much of his face as was not covered with beard had gone white. Tolson, obviously, was under the strain of some great emotion.

Fern appeared at the door. "I didn't find quite two dozen in the coop, but if you'll take yesterday's eggs—"

"Sorry I've bothered you, miss," Tolson said. "I just remembered that I've got to go on to Eden. I'll stop for the eggs on my way back. Good day."

He shouldered out of the house, bowing his leonine head to clear the low door. He picked up the rifle he had left standing outside and walked away.

"They say he is a murderer," Fern breathed. "He doesn't look it."

"If he ain't now he soon will be or I miss my guess," Don said. "I think I'll ride in to Eden."

"But you'll be arrested if you do," Fern protested.

"Got to take that chance. I still think that's a bluff."

Dr. Bland hastily began to prepare something in a glass. "Take this in to your father, will you, Fern?" he asked.

When the girl had gone he turned to Don. "You think those questions Tolson asked had anything to do with his going to town?" he whispered.

"I'll bet my life they did. That old boy knows something. One of the things he knows, and which we're fools not to have guessed, is that Fern's not Dawson's daughter. Look: Tolson is no cow thief. Apparently he don't even own a horse. Yet Motley and his gang are trying to implicate him in stealing my sister's cattle. Maybe it's more than just as a blind for them."

"He certainly seemed to change when I told him Motley was trying to make Fern marry him, and yet he'd never seen the girl before," Bland said.

"I've got a feeling there's a hen on in Eden, and I'm going to be there to see what hatches out," Don declared.

Fern came back into the room. "He wouldn't take this," she reported.

"Let it go," Doc said.

"I do hope you won't get into any trouble," Fern said to Don.

"I'll be all right. Only thing I'm worried about is that Motley may try to molest you again. But don't you let anybody bluff you, kid," he urged earnestly.

Don hoped to be able to overtake Ad Tolson, but the man had left the rode and was taking some short-cut. He had gone less than two miles, however, before he met another man; a tall, gangling man in a business suit, who rode such short stirrups that the slightest misbehavior of his mount would have unseated him. Don stopped.

"Howdy, stranger," he said. "Wonder if you could tell me if I'm on the right road to Eden?"

"Which indicates you are a stranger in our fair land," the other replied. "Yes, this is the Eden road. And, my friend, the place is well named. If you are a young fellow looking for a start in life you couldn't do better than to look me up in town."

"Is that so? You, I take it, are a vender of real estate."

"And a luminary of the law," the other said proudly. "The name is Hinkle." He waited expectantly.

"Mine's Fullmer."

The lawyer betrayed no surprise. He reached out to shake hands.

"Just what is this old cuss up to?" Don wondered as he took the slack, clammy hand.

"Fullmer?" the lawyer murmured, rubbing his hand across his whiskers. "Let me see: the name sounds familiar."

"You may have heard my late brother-in-law mention me. He was Dick Carlton, from over on Burnt Creek."

"Of course. Too bad about Dick. We were good friends. I heard that you were in the country. Let me see, weren't you mixed up some way in the shooting of Matt Dawson the other day?" Hinkle queried blandly.

"Sure. I shot him. Going down now to give myself up. Soon as I heard there was some dirty snake of a lawyer trying to blackmail Miss Dawson I headed down to put things straight. It'll be easy to prove that Dawson got what was coming to him."

The lawyer's aplomb was considerably shattered. "Well, well, you don't say," he sneered visibly. "Young man, I happen to be that lawyer, but I'm not trying to blackmail anybody; only trying to keep the girl out of trouble. But if you want to press things you'll certainly get yourself a long term in the penitentiary."

"So you don't want it to come to a trial," Don mocked. "That's all I wanted to know."

"Listen, you young whippersnapper," Hinkkle roared angrily, "we'll give that girl a chance to save herself, but we'll make you rue the day you ever came to Eden."

"And just a minute ago you were going to sell me a lot! My, my! A man who wears whiskers like yours never should let his angry passions rise. They jiggle so much they make you look plumb frivolous."

"You infernal scoundrel," Hinkle bellowed, and made the mistake of rising in his short stirrups to strike his tormentor with a riding crop.

Don spurred forward, dextrously inserted his foot under a stirrup and heaved upward just as Hinkle swung. The gangling lawyer lost balance. His arms waved wildly. He grabbed at the saddle horn just too late. By some strange physical contortion he managed to hit the earth—flat on his stomach.

"Ugh!" the lawyer exploded as he struck. When he raised his head his mouth was full of dust.

"Well, so long," Don said. "See you in church."

## *Chapter* 11

AS Don Fullmer rode past the *Cowhand's Delight* the sinister fellow with the slippery name of Eel, ducked hastily into the saloon where Jud Motley was playing stud with several cronies.

"Believe it or not, Jud," the Eel said excitedly, "that feller Fullmer just rode in."

Motley looked up without excitement. "Where'd he go?"

"He was headin' toward the courthouse."

"H-m. Kinda brash, seems like. Keep an eye on him, an' when he leaves there let me know." Motley stuck his cigar back in his mouth and continued playing.

Half an hour later the Eel was back with another report. "Fullmer left the courthouse a few minutes ago. He's been talkin' all the time with Judge Vane."

"Yeh? Elijah Vane would like to get something on me. Where's that fool cowhand now?"

"At the bar—about twenty feet from here," the Eel grinned.

Motley chuckled. He rolled his cigar around in the corner of his mouth. Got up and lumbered into the barroom.

Don Fullmer was leaning against the bar, a whiskey glass in his hand.

"Well, my friend, I'm glad to see you here in the *Cowhand's Delight,*" Motley said affably. "You're Mrs. Carlton's brother, ain't you?"

"That's right," Don said warily. This wasn't the kind of greeting he had expected.

"Young fellow, if you'd told me who you was we wouldn't have had that run-in the other day," Motley chuckled. "I want to keep on friendly terms with Mrs. Carlton, and I sure can't do it if I fight with her brother. Have a drink on the house."

"Why, thanks," Don said. "I was afraid you'd be sore."

"I was a little," Motley admitted. "You see I was pretty upset about Matt Dawson gettin' shot. Matt's a good friend of mine. I don't mind sayin', I expect to marry his daughter."

"I suppose when a man reaches your age he has to do his courting with a deputy sheriff and a lawyer," Don said maliciously.

An angry flush swept over Motley's face. Just a moment the big man's fists clinched, then he relaxed and smiled.

"Matt's pretty violent," he said.

"Yes, I'd say he was," Don agreed.

"Well, I know Matt's hotheaded, and maybe he got what was coming to him," Motley allowed. "Anyway, I don't want your sister getting mad at me, because I hope to buy her ranch. At a good price, of course."

"She kind of give me the idea she didn't want to sell," Don remarked.

"I think she'll change her mind eventually," he said largely. "I can afford to wait. Meantime, there are people who would take advantage of a lone woman trying to run a cow outfit. That's a man's game."

"She's got a foreman, ain't she?" Don countered.

Motley smiled blandly. "Oh, yes. But on my outfit that fellow wouldn't grade hoss wrangler."

"At least we agree on that, Motley. For instance, I can't understand why he allows your outfit to cut fences and fill his range with J M cows."

"What's that?"

"Why, that's what brought me to town. You see I caught a bunch of your men cutting our fence, so I rode down to see what could be done about it. Talked with Judge Vane and he said if we had any evidence we could sure enough bring suit, and have your men arrested for malicious mischief."

"Yes—if you had the evidence," Motley grinned.

"Oh, that's the easiest part," Don said lightly. "I was careful to collect the evidence—a dead horse, and a saddle and bridle belonging to one of your men."

"What? You mean to say—"

"That's whatever, Motley. I'm buying chips in this game, and I'm warning you to go easy."

Motley swung away from the bar. "All right, if you want war you can have it," he rasped. "But I'll tell you this: Your sister has got the best offer she'll ever have, and it won't be open long."

At that moment Attorney Hinkle, looking bedraggled and dirty, burst into the saloon. At sight of Don Fullmer alongside the bar he stopped abruptly.

"Well?" Motley thundered at him.

"Jud, on my way out there I was assaulted by that young man there. He knocked me off my horse."

"Tossed you off, you mean," Don corrected.

"I didn't know what he was up to so I turned around and followed him back. I intend swearing out a warrant for assault, unless there are graver charges."

"There ain't," Don told them laconically. "You don't dare make any arrests about that Dawson business, and you know it."

"By God, we'll see about that," Motley roared. "We've got Dawson's sworn statement about the way that shootin' happened, and —"

"But Dawson can repudiate his statement," Don smiled confidently. "When he's asked to prove that Fern is his daughter —"

"What's that?" Motley hissed. There was a murderous gleam in his eye. Don's random shot had struck home.

"It's your move, Motley," the puncher challenged.

"Hinkle, come on back here," Motley growled, and strode back toward his office in the rear.

Don was in no hurry to leave the saloon. When he finally went out on the sidewalk the Eel was not far away. Don knew that he was being watched. He sauntered up and down the street. Always the spy dogged his heels.

His talk with Judge Vane had encouraged him. Vane had not minimized Jud Motley's power, but he had also asserted that there was a fair proportion of the populace, including himself, who would be only too glad to see Motley come a cropper.

"You've got to have an iron-clad case, however," the judge had warned. "Motley controls the sheriff's office, and it would be hard to get an impartial jury."

"My idea," Don had said, "is that whether he could be convicted or not a public review of his methods is something he don't want. Could he stand having it publicly known how he tried to force a helpless girl to marry him?"

"He's got a thick hide," Judge Vane had answered. "He wouldn't mind if he could get what he wants."

Don had left there feeling that Motley must be beaten by means outside the courts, but it was comforting to know that the law was not altogether unfriendly.

He tramped the streets until he was tired, then went into a restaurant. He was half through a piece of apple pie when he saw Ad Tolson pass the window. He gave a longing look at the pie, tossed the waitress half a dollar, and followed the big, gaunt ex-convict down the street. Tolson was walking with a slow, unhurried stride, and he carried no gun. Apparently he had ditched his rifle somewhere along the way. Don noticed, however, that his huge fists were clinched.

Suddenly the Eel, who had been shadowing Don, darted past the

puncher to cut across to the rear of the *Cowhand's Delight*. Something prompted Don to reach out and seize the fellow by the collar. The Eel whirled like a cat. He spat like a cat. His hand half darted under his shoulder, but with a move equally fast Don caught his wrist.

"You draw a knife on me, you dirty spy, and I'll cut your ears off with it," Don advised him evenly.

"Lemme by, I'm not botherin' you." The fellow tried to break loose and Don twisted his collar until his breath was cut off. He ceased struggling, although his eyes glared hatred.

"You've been dogging me ever since I hit town," Don said. He was killing time, holding the Eel long enough to permit Tolson to reach the saloon before Jud Motley could be warned of his approach.

The saloon doors closed on the big woodchopper, and Don turned the Eel around and gave him a swift kick in the other direction. "You prance down the street and don't look around," Don ordered. "If you hesitate or look back you're liable to get a slug right between the shoulders. I've got a war on with Jud Motley, and that includes his boot kissers. Hike!"

The Eel ran for a couple of rods, then regaining a vestige of confidence and dignity he slowed to a walk. But he didn't look back.

It was time to know what was going on inside the saloon. Don turned his back on the fleeing spy and hastily entered the saloon. An amazing tableau met his gaze.

Apparently Motley and Hinkle had been in the main barroom, for they were now backed against one end of the bar, while the gray, grim ex-convict faced them. He had no weapon but his bare hands, but a more powerful persuadant, perhaps, was the implacable look in his gray eyes. At any rate both of the others seemed paralyzed at the moment.

"You knew I'd come after you one of these days, didn't you, Jud?" the big woodchopper was saying. "You've got lots of hired killers. I'm surprised you didn't send some of them to get me first."

"Why should I?" Motley found his voice at last. "All I know about you is that you're an ex-convict. As long as you let me alone—"

"Did you think I'd let you alone after what you done to me?" Tolson gave a low hard laugh. "Twenty years in the pen with three years off for good behavior because you framed me for a crime I didn't commit. Convicted on the testimony of a liar, and prosecuted by a shyster attorney who knew he was presenting false testimony. Tell me, Hinkle: after Motley stole my Silver Chief mine how much of it did you and your brother Alf get? From the looks of things neither you nor Dawson got much. It served you right."

"I remember the man now, Jud," Hinkle said. "I did prosecute him. I think he must have lost his mind. He was guilty as hell."

Don Fullmer, standing by the door, saw Motley convey some sort of signal. Two men edged along to the other end of the bar. One was

Tug Hopkins, the other Levi Bunch. None of them had seen Don enter.

"I'm not crazy, and you know it," the woodchopper went on. "I don't even want any of the money that you stole from me. I'm satisfied to make my living choppin' cordwood, but I am getting sick of your riders trying to frame me for stealin' your cattle."

"You are crazy," Motley said, "or damned foxy. I know we have been losin' cattle. Mebbe now I know where they went."

"You'd like to send me back to the pen, Jud, but I'm not goin'. I had reasons for coming into your country, and I was going to wait. But today, Jud, I went down to Matt Dawson's."

Don, watching, saw Jud Motley's jaw sag. Hinkle, too, had visibly paled. His wispy beard twitched.

Tolson was watching them. Waiting. A man in the back of the saloon scuffed his toe. It made men jerk like a thunderclap.

"If you think Dawson's girl is your daughter you're crazy," Motley blustered. "Your wife an' daughter both died years ago—of poverty—an' disgrace."

That last taunt was more than Tolson could stand. Before Motley could move the woodchopper's powerful hands were about his throat.

## *Chapter* 12

SO sudden had been Tolson's assault that Motley's back, powerful man that he was, was bent far back across the bar. His tongue popped out of his mouth. He could utter only a bestial, incoherent sound. His hands made wavering gestures for help before they grabbed at his assailant's wrists in a futile attempt to break that killing strangle hold.

Hopkins and Bunch had not had time to execute their maneuvers. Now, seeing their boss in peril, they went into action. They dared not shoot, but Tug Hopkins jerked out a gun to strike the big woodchopper over the head. A two-foot-long loaded rubber hose, such as were frequently carried by range town bouncers, dribbled out of Levi Bunch's sleeve. The barkeep grabbed a bung-starter.

The odds were too great, but Don Fullmer didn't intend to stand idly by and watch the unequal contest. A single bound placed him between the combatants and Tug Hopkins. With a snarl the fellow raised his gun to club down this rank interferer, but before the weapon could fall Don's fist churned into his stomach. Hopkins gasped for breath. He dropped his hands. The next moment his feet were flying higher than his head as Don shot a mighty uppercut to his jaw. That ended Hopkins' activities for some time to come.

Fast as that action had been both Bunch and the bartender had brought their weapons down upon Ad Tolson's head. They staggered

the big man, but couldn't bring him down. Either blow would have felled an ordinary man. Amazement made them hestitate. They had jarred the man enough, however, to allow Motley to straighten up, but the man's face was still a horrible thing to see.

The man staggered far enough from the bar that the barkeep's second attempt to reach Tolson with the bung-starter fell short. It made a dent in the bar. Again Bunch swung his blackjack to the woodchopper's head, and this time it was hard enough to bring Tolson to his knees. But he didn't relax his grip on his adversary's throat. He dragged Motley down with him.

Then Don shot a left to Bunch's jaw that rocked that worthy back on his heels. He was not an open target like Hopkins, however. He came back swinging the loaded hose. Involuntarily Don threw up his left arm and caught most of the force of the blow where it was still sore from the time Dawson hit him with the blacksnake. For a moment he thought his arm was broken. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the bartender come around the end of the bar to join the fray. He tried a long, looping right to Bunch's jaw, and it landed. The fellow reeled a few steps backward until the barkeep caught and righted him.

Don was breathing hard, and his left arm hung almost useless. This thing, he decided, had gone far enough. Both of his foes were armed, and there was no sense in him trying to oppose them with his naked hands. His right hand dropped to his gun just as the barkeep drew back to fling the bung-starter. The next instant the fellow gave a yell and leaped high in the air. The bung-starter fell to the floor and he grabbed one foot; while he hopped wildly about on the other. With cool deliberation, but plenty of haste, Don had burned the fellow's foot with a bullet.

Levi Bunch fell back, and lifted both hands as Don pressed a six-gun against his belly.

"Drop that snake," Don hissed, and the rubber hose fell to the floor. For a moment it actually seemed to crawl.

Keeping an eye upon both men Don turned back to where he could see the battle going on between the giants. Motley was the heavier of the two, because of his soft living; but Ad Tolson, despite his stooped shoulders, still towered above him.

It was a struggle of Titans.

Suddenly Tolson let go his hold around his foe's waist, and encircled the back of Motley's neck with his left arm. Equally swiftly, he planted the heel of his hand under the man's chin and began to press upward and sideways.

An agonized croak came from Motley. The few spectators, none of whom dared to interfere, involuntarily groaned. Even Don emitted a gasp of horror. He expected to hear Motley's neck snap like a twig.

Don thought quickly. Tolson was still a man of mystery to him, but

if he was not stopped nothing could save him from the gallows. He must be saved. If he was Fern Dawson's father there were things to clear up which only he could clear. And the girl must not find her real father in a felon's cell.

"Tolson," he cried. "Tolson, let go. The man's dead."

It was doubtful if Tolson heard him, or could hear anything in his terrible concentration. Don thrust his six-gun back in the holster and seized the man's huge wrist. Only by exerting all his strength could he jerk the hand from under Motley's chin—undoubtedly just in time to save Motley's neck. But it was not yet over. Tolson flung the puncher away as though he had been a mere child. Once more he fastened a hold upon his enemy's throat.

Don looked around in desperation. He could get no help. Those who could help would kill both him and Tolson if given half an opportunity.

He saw the loaded hose which Bunch had dropped upon the floor, and which the man was again furtively eyeing. Don pounced upon the weapon and brought it down full force upon Motley's head. The man went limp in Tolson's grasp. But Don didn't stop. He was facing Tolson, and he struck the man squarely across the forehead with the blackjack and staggered him back against the bar. Tolson had to let loose of his victim, and Motley collapsed to the floor.

For a minute Tolson was too dazed to speak. Don had never seen a man so tough. When the giant woodchopper began to rally his faculties he still seemed determined to continue the battle. But Don was in front of him.

"Tolson, listen to me," he pleaded. "You've got to get out of here. You've killed a man."

Tolson passed a hand across his face. He was like a man coming out of a trance.

"I shoulda killed him long ago, the dirty double-crossing snake." He saw then that Motley was not dead. The man was beginning to stir. For a moment Don feared that Tolson was going to try to renew the attack. Then there was a diversion as the saloon doors opened to admit Deputy Sheriff Bruce Coates. Following warily behind him came the Eel.

Don stepped swiftly beside Tolson. Their only advantage was that Motley was now flopping about on the floor like a landed fish as he strove to get breath through his abused windpipe. His retainers were still too amazed and frightened to take the initiative against the two outsiders.

"What's goin' on here?" Coates cried sharply. His eyes bulged as he saw two men on the floor, and another nursing a bleeding foot.

"They tried to murder the boss," Levi Bunch got out.

Coates had his hand upon his gun.. He came slowly toward Don.

The latter waited, hand poised just above the weapon. Officer or no officer he was ready to defend himself.

Attorney Tom Hinkle found his voice. All through the fight he had been too frightened to move or speak.

"Put them both under arrest," he exclaimed in a voice still squeaky from fright.

"Gimme that gun, Fullmer," Coates ordered, but he was not as brave as he sounded, and Don sensed the man's weakness.

"I wouldn't advise you to try takin' it way from me," the puncher said coolly. "I've done nothing but save Motley's life, after he started a fight with Tolson here."

It was a dangerous spot. Don could keep an eye upon those in the room, but more enemies might arrive, and there might be peep-holes which he could not see through which a bullet might come at any time.

Then Jud Motley struggled to his feet, and veering wide of Don and Tolson staggered to the bar.

"Let 'em go," he croaked hoarsely.

"You mean you don't want 'em arrested?" Tom Hinkle asked incredulously.

"No, I don't," Motley swore profanely. "I'll settle my score with them in my own way."

Ad Tolson started for the door, his great shoulders more stooped than ever. Don followed, but he walked backward, ready for a quick shot if anyone made a false move.

They found themselves alone on the sidewalk. Don got on his horse, and fell in beside the big woodchopper as he trudged out of town as stolidly as he had come in.

"I'm sorry I had to hit you," Don offered. "You'd have killed Motley if I hadn't."

"I guess it's as well you did," Tolson replied. "I lost my head. A man never can tell. I was sure I'd never lose my temper again."

"Hadn't you better hire a horse?" Don queried. "You're in no condition to take a long walk."

"I can walk all right," Tolson grunted.

There were many things which Don wanted to ask, but Tolson wasn't a man one could ply with questions.

Tolson stopped abruptly. "Here's where I leave the road," he said. "My rifle is over there in that brush."

"I'm going back to Dawson's," Don said tentatively. "Will I see you there?"

"No. Listen, young feller: you look like a man of sense. Something was said in that saloon that might make you think I claim to be the Dawson girl's father. I ain't. My kid died—just as Motley said she

did. But Dawson ain't that girl's father either. You can tell her that."

"She'll want some proof," Don said reasonably.

"It's been just eighteen years since Jud Motley framed me on a murder charge so he could git hold of a mine I owned. I was prosecuted by that skunk, Tom Hinkle. One of the witnesses who gave perjured testimony against me at the trial was Matt Dawson. At that time he wasn't married and he had no child. That girl is more than eighteen."

"If you had a daughter," Don persisted, "how do you know she died?"

The pained expresson on Tolson's face made Don regret having asked the question.

"They both died when I'd been in the pen about three years," the man said. "Mary was just four years old. My wife had kept fighting for the Silver Chief—that was the name of our mine. She was reduced to living in a board shack that last winter, across the river from town. The baby got pneumonia. My wife started across the river on the ice to get help. The ice broke, and she got soaked in the icy water. She got pneumonia, too, and died the same day the baby did. I've still got the letter that told me about it. A woman who was a friend to my wife wrote it."

"I see. Still, from the way you went after Motley today—"

"A man has lots of time to think in a penitentiary," Tolson stated slowly. "There was a time when I only lived to get my hands on Motley like I did today. But gradually I figured out that just givin' a man a violent death is a poor sort of revenge. I built a plan. I wanted to make Jud Motley afraid. That's why I come to live in this country. I knew he'd think I was after him. I wanted to give him something to worry about. I knew he'd want to have me killed, and I knew he wouldn't dare."

"Why?"

Tolson had evidently said more than he intended. But after a moment he went on. "I'll tell you, but I want you to keep still about it. The first thing I did when I got out was hunt up the man I believed had committed the crime I was sent up for. He wasn't looking for me. Well," grimly, "he admitted the truth; signed a full confession that he had been paid to do it by Jud Motley. I sent that confession to the warden of the penitenitary with instructions to open it if I met a violent death. But before that I mailed a copy of the confession and my letter to Jud Motley."

"But I still don't understand. If you got the confession why didn't you use it?"

"Because while I'm alive I'm only an ex-con. The man who did the killing would claim he signed the confession under duress. My word

wouldn't count. But if I'm murdered Jud Motley will have a hard time keepin' his neck out of a noose, an' he knows it."

"By golly, you're right," Don said. "He's got to keep you alive whether he wants to or not."

"But that don't keep him from tryin' to put me back in the pen," Tolson said grimly. "Mebbe you've noticed I never ride a horse. That's the reason. They can't very well say I could rustle cows on foot."

"Yet they are sayin' you act as lookout for rustlers," Don informed.

Tolson nodded. "Sooner or later I suppose Motley will git away with it. Mebbe I'll—" He broke off abruptly. "Come up an' see me some time if yuh care to," he invited, and abruptly walked away.

Don meditatively watched the big woodchopper out of sight before he rode on. A woodchooper he might be now, a convict he certainly had been, but Ad Tolson had once been a man of affairs. He had a magnetism, a natural leadership which Don, who was always inclined to lead himself, instinctly felt. Who was he? Was Tolson his right name? Above all was he the father of the girl who called herself Fern Dawson?

## *Chapter* 13

ONLY a short distance from town Don met three horsemen face to face. Two of the men he recognized instantly. One was the man whose horse he had shot that morning. Involuntarily Don's eyes went to the saddle the man was riding. It was an old hull that wasn't the least in keeping with the rest of the man's meticulous outfit. The fellow's face still betrayed signs of anger.

Left to himself Don would have given the usual friendly nod of strangers passing, but the men would not have it so. They stopped. The oldest man, who Don had never seen before, turned his horse sideways under Blackie's chin. It looked like trouble.

"Howdy, stranger," the man said. "I'm Dutch Schiller, foreman for Jud Motley. You lookin' fer me?"

"No; can't say that I am," Don drawled.

"Oh. I was expectn' my boss to send a man out to see about buyin' some beef. Thought you might be him."

It was an invitation, command rather, for Don to explain himself. He wasn't minded to do any explaining.

"No," he said, "you've got the wrong man."

Schiller did not move from in front of him. The other two spread out.

"Which way you headin'?" Schiller persisted.

"It happens I'm takin' some medicine out to the Dawson place for

Doc Bland," Don answered truthfully enough. "You fellows got anything to say about it?"

"Plenty," Harry Tezak spat out. "Yo're the hombre that shot Dawson in the first place. Yo're a brother of Mrs. Carlton over the hill. Ain't that right?"

"Half right," Don admitted laconically. "I'm Mrs. Carlton's brother."

"And yo're the dirty snake who shot my horse this mornin'," Tezak hissed. "Damn yore soul, you fetch back my saddle an' pay me for that horse or I'll—"

"You'll what?" Don challenged. "Sure I shot your horse. So what? You were cuttin' my sister's fence. I've got your saddle an' it'll be used as evidence against you. Just what was it you said you was goin' to do?"

His boldness surprised them. They were three to one. Professional gunmen. Yet they hesitated. Tezak's hand was on his gun. He waited only permission from his foreman. But Schiller made no sign. The puncher's grayish eyes, now almost green, were bent upon the foreman. His hand hovered above his gun. Schiller had planted himself in the most dangerous spot, and now he realized that the stranger meant to concentrate upon him.

"Hold it, Harry," Schiller said hurriedly. "No use havin' a killin' right here. You'd better listen to reason, young feller. You can't buck us. Shore we cut that fence, an' we'll keep on cuttin' it till yore sister decides to sell. Anybody that gits in our road will git hurt."

"And anybody I catch cuttin' fence will get the same medicine—only next time I'll not shoot the horse," Don retorted. His gaze filtered for a moment upon Harry Tezak.

"Come one," Schiller growled at the other two, and the men rode on, Tezak several times looking back over his shoulder.

"Dangerous man that, Blackie," Don muttered. If Schiller hadn't been along there would have been a bloody gun fight. Nevertheless, he had the feeling that Dutch Schiller was perhaps the most dangerous man he had encountered in Eden, not barring even Jud Motley.

It was a little after dark when Don rode into the Dawson yard. Fern came to meet him.

"We've been worried about you," she said frankly. "Did you meet three of Motley's men on the way? They stopped here on the pretense of asking how my father was. But I'm sure they're the men you had trouble with, and they're the worst of the lot."

"I met them all right, but we only passed the time of day and rode on," he said easily. He looked into the anxious face of the girl, and a strange, protective feeling stirred within him. How much, he wondered, dared he tell her?"

"How is Dawson?" he asked, as she walked out to the corral with him.

"Dr. Bland says he's getting along all right," she said rather absent-

mindedly. "Don, Dr. Bland told me that that man said I was not my —not Matt Dawson's child. If he told the truth that Dawson was not married eighteen years ago, then I'm not. I'm nearly twenty. Did—anything happen in town today?"

"Tolson told me the same thing he did Doc. I'm sure he was telling the truth. He was so mad when he heard that Jud Motley was trying to make you marry him that he went down there, and almost choked Motley to death—"

"Oh, dear, was he hurt?" she gasped.

"Motley? Well, it didn't do him any good."

"No. I mean Mr. Tolson."

"Oh no. We left town together. He may be along this way after while. He was afoot."

"I had the strangest feeling when he looked at me when I came in with those eggs this afternoon. I—I wonder what he could have meant in my life. If he knows Dawson isn't my father maybe he knows who my real parents are. Maybe—" She seemed unable to go on.

"I know what you're thinking," Don said gently. "Tolson told me that he had had a daughter your age, but that she died while he was in the penitentiary."

"Oh."

"It was Jud Motley who had Tolson sent to the pen. Tolson claims he was framed, and I believe him. Knowing the kind of man Motley was he naturally didn't want to see you forced into a marriage with him."

"I'm all bewildered," Fern confessed. "I've always supposed Dawson was my father, yet I've wondered how he could treat me as he has. I've worried because I simply couldn't force myself to—to love him as a parent."

"No wonder," Don blurted. "Look, Fern: you don't owe the fellow a thing. In the morning you must let me take you over to my sister's. Fanny will be glad to have you."

"No; I can't do that," the girl said slowly. "By the way, we had other visitors after you left. Ralph Churchill and Miss Carlton."

Don wasn't pleased. "What were they doing here?" he demanded.

"Churchill claimed to be looking for cattle. I think Miss Carlton came to size me up."

"Is that why you don't want to go and live with Fanny?"

"It may have something to do with it," she admitted.

"Fern," Don said earnestly, "I believe we can make Matt Dawson tell all the truth about you. But before I do anything I want to know if you can stand the truth. In spite of what he says I have a sneaking notion that Ad Tolson may indeed be your father."

"If he is I want to know it. Whether he's an ex-convict or not would

make no difference to me. All I want is the truth," she said earnestly.

"Then let's go."

Don invited the doctor to join them, but tersely ordered the nurse to leave the room. Matt Dawson looked up at the three with hate in his eyes.

"You kin all go to hell," Dawson cursed.

"Ad Tolson is comin' to see you," Don said. "He went down to see Jud Motley today, and almost choked him to death. He told how Motley, Hinkle, another man and you framed him years ago. He told about his wife and daughter. He knows that Fern isn't your daughter. He's comin' to find out the truth about her. Do you want to see him?"

"No, of course, I don't. He's a liar. Who'd believe anything an ex-con said?" the fellow shouted, but his face had turned a grayish green as Don talked.

"We would," Don said. "We want the truth out of you, or we'll let Tolson in here with you and lock the door on the outside."

"You can't do that," the fellow groveled. "Ad Tolson hates me. He'd kill me, an' I couldn't defend myself."

"The only way to defend yourself is to tell us the truth," Don said implacably.

"Tolson ain't here. If he went to Eden Jud Motley would kill him," Dawson said weakly.

"He don't dare to kill him because Tolson has a confession from the man who did the crime he was sent up for. Motley will go to the penitentiary if anything happens to Tolson."

"Oh, let him be," Fern said wearily. "I should hate him, but I don't. I feel only pity—and contempt."

"You do, eh?" the man cried savagely. "You want me to talk, eh? All right, I'll talk. Ad Tolson *is* your father. A dirty jailbird, that's what he is. You ought to be proud of him."

"If he is," the girl said steadily, "I am."

"Nobody kin do anything with me," Dawson maintained sullenly. "Tolson was sent to the pen, his family was left destitute. His wife died an' I took his kid an' raised her."

"Abused her, you mean," Don said viciously. "Made a slave of her, an' then tried to make her marry Jud Motley. Dawson, if you wasn't crippled an' helpless—"

"Take it easy, Don," Dr. Bland intervened. "Maybe Mr. Dawson has some more to tell us."

"I'll tell you nothin'," Dawson growled, and turned his face to the wall.

"I'll get Tolson," Don said briefly.

Dawson flung over on his back. "No, don't," he cried. "If—if Tolson knew she was his daughter he'd kill me. I—I—been afraid ever since he come back. That—that's why I horsewhipped her to make

her marry Jud Motley. I wanted to git rid of her an' git away."

"We're listening," Dr. Bland murmured, and reached for a pad of paper.

"I can't tell yuh much," Dawson said sulkily. "I swore ag'in Tolson because Jud Motley had somethin' on me. I reckon he wasn't guilty, but he had a mine called the Silver Chief, which Jud wanted. After Ad went to the pen Jud took over the mine, but Ad's wife brought suit against him, an' got an injunction against him operatin' the mine. Right atter that she died. The kid was purty sick, but Jud sneaked it away, an' it got well. When the kid was three or four years old Jud told me to take an' raise it.

"That injunction still stood, but Jud disregarded it an' went to work in the mine. It was profits he got from it that gave him his start here. He'd sent word to Tolson that the kid was dead, too, an' made him believe he'd lost title to the Silver Chief.

"All the time Jud knowed that Tolson might git out an' find out the truth. Besides, the mine had about got worked out, but there's enough ore left to fool some sucker into buyin' it. Years ago he planned to make Fern marry him when she growed up. Then, when her dad was dead, she'd be the owner of the Silver Chief, an' Jud would be in the clear. He wanted her tamed so he could han'le her, an' that's why he told me to break her spirit. But was hard to tame."

"Well, of all the dirty deals," Don gritted.

"Look here," Dawson pleaded. "You've gotta keep still about this till I git outa the country. Jud Motley would have me murdered if he knew I'd talked."

It was on the tip of Don's tongue to voice a refusal, but Fern interrupted him.

"He's right," she said. "I know he's had to do everything Jud Motley wanted. After all we—we can't let Motley kill him."

"But the man has robbed you and your real father. His story will clear Tol—your father of that crime. Maybe get his mine back," Don argued.

"It—it'll have to wait," Fern declared.

"Dawson, I've written your story down," the doctor said. "I'm going to add a statement that the story you signed about the way you were shot was a lie. You sign this statement, and I think Fern will be willing to wait until you're able to travel before using it. But if you won't sign I'm afraid you'll have to take the consequences."

Fern was quick to assent to the doctor's proposition. Dawson betrayed reluctance, but his capitulation was certain.

"There's one other thing," Don put in. "We want Tolson cleared. He got a confession from the man who committeed the murder he was convicted of, but the man will deny it unless there's additional proof. We want the name of that man in your statement, Dawson."

"Yes, we do," Fern added quickly.

"The man Tolson was accused of killin' was named Byron Coulter. He claimed to have discovered the Silver Chief before Tolson did. The man who killed him is Alf Hinkle. He's a brother of Tom Hinkle the lawyer," Dawson enunciated.

"Alf Hinkle. What does he do now?" Don queried.

"Not much of anything except loaf around the *Cowhand's Delight*," Dr. Bland volunteered. "The fellow is nothing but a saloon loafer, a sodden wreck."

He presented the writing he had just done to Dawson, and the man signed. All of the man's belligerency had gone. Fear of Ad Tolson had caused him to betray an even deadlier individual in the person of Jud Motley. He kept reminding them of their promise not to use his confession until he was able to walk.

They went back into the front room, sending the nurse back to Dawson.

"What are you going to do about you father, Fern?" Dr. Bland asked with his usual directness. "Going to tell him you are his daughter?"

"Of course I am," Fern declared. "We'll not break our word to Dawson, but after all my own father has gone through I want him to know the truth just as soon as I can tell him."

Suddenly Don motioned the others to silence, then stepped hastily to the door. As he flung it open all three plainly caught the sound of a horse galloping rapidly away. They faced each other blankly.

"A spy!" Don told them. "Jud Motley must have sent somebody out here to see what happened." He stepped outside and around to the window of Dawson's room. He groaned. The bottom of the shade was at least three inches above the bottom of the window. There were tracks there. The spy, whoever he was, had certainly seen Dawson signing his confession. He might have heard everything that had been said.

## *Chapter* 14

"THIS means," Dr. Bland said blankly, "that there'll be the devil to pay." His usually ruddy face had whitened.

"What do you think they will do?" Fern asked.

"If I've sized Motley up correctly he won't stop at much of anything to get this confession of Dawson's, and stop the man's mouth. If he don't do something it'll mean not only the loss of his wealth, but a long term in prison."

"You don't think he'd dare to come here, and deliberately murder my—murder Matt Dawson?" Fern queried.

"And the rest of us if he could," Don replied. "We've got to get out of here."

"But we can't leave Dawson," Dr. Bland protested.

"Can't we move him?"

"It would be dangerous. Might start a hemorrhage, and he's lost too much blood already. Still, we may have to do it. But where would we take him? Eden will be more dangerous than this place."

"That's right," Don admitted. "I'd thought of taking everybody over to my sister's, but we can't take a rig over the mountain. We'd have to go by way of Eden. Looks like we'd have to stick."

"I suggest that the first thing is to conceal this confession of Dawson's," Bland suggested.

"Let me have it," Fern said. "I know a place where it will be safe." She insisted that Don accompany her out to where several old broken-down farm implements were piled. "There's a cache here that I've often used before. It's in the inside of this old wagon hub. Nobody would ever think of looking there."

"Look here, Fern," the puncher said wonderingly. "You seem happier than I've ever seen you."

"Of course," she told him brightly. "Why shouldn't I be. I've found out that Matt Dawson is no kin of mine—and I've found my own father. That's more important than anything. I can hardly wait until I see him."

"Could you find your way up to his cabin tonight?"

"Of course. I know this country like a book."

"Then go up there — now. Doc an' me won't need you here," he urged.

"I don't want to run away."

"You won't be. Hustle. If your father isn't warned they may kill him, too."

She thought it over. "All right, Don, I'll go. I must see my father. But I'll come back. And — and I'll never be able to thank you for what you've done."

"You're sweet," he said gently. "You deserve every bit of happiness you can get."

They returned to the house, where they could hear Matt Dawson shrieking and swearing. They had been careful to conceal the presence of the spy from him, but somehow the man had divined it.

"Damn you all, you tricked me, an' now Jud Motley knows I've peached an' he'll be up here. I won't stand a chance," he squalled.

"We'll protect you," Bland told him. "Jud Motley isn't all-powerful."

"You'll find out. I want that paper back. I'll deny every word of it."

"It's a little late for that, since we've already got the information," Don said.

"Then take me away from here before Motley comes. I can walk. Just give me a crutch or something," the frightened man pleaded.

"I'll give you a shot in the arm that will put you to sleep for the next twelve hours if you don't keep quiet," the doctor said.

That served to quiet the man for a while. His eyes followed the girl he had so vilely abused as she made her preparations to depart. There was a sort of stupid wonder in his eyes that he had lost his old-time power over her.

"Fern," he called huskily, "you goin' to Tolson?"

"Yes — Matt," she replied.

"I — I — know I been purty mean to yuh, Fern. I didn't mean to be, but Jud Motley made me. He — he said I'd have to plumb break your spirit so he could han'le yuh."

"Let's forget it — if we can," Fern said generously. "I forgive you all the whippings."

"Good girl. Please don't tell Ad Tolson anything about them. I'm a cripple. I can't defend myself," the man whimpered.

"I'll promise that my father won't harm you," Fern assured him.

Don helped her catch and saddle her pony. "Please be careful," she begged.

"Good luck," he returned, and waved her on her way.

Don went to the house for a short conference with the doctor, and found Bland engaged in a hot argument with the nurse. The woman knew that something dangerous was impending, and she was insisting that the doctor allow her to return to town.

"Your job, and mine, is to take care of this patient," Bland told her firmly. "You'll stay right here, and see that he doesn't try to leave the bed. If he does jab him with this hypodermic needle."

Before the doctor's firmness the woman tearfully subsided.

It was perhaps an hour and a half later that Don, lying in the brush close to the ridge road, heard a posse of horsemen approaching. Through the moonlight he counted ten men. Jud Morley was coming in force.

Don had chosen his position well, at a point where the men were likely to stop to decide upon their approach. If they followed the road until Dawson's road turned off they would pass within a rod of where he lay. If they decided to go on foot for a surprise attack they would leave their horses just below. So he was not at all surprised when the men stopped.

They spoke in low voices, yet with no particular effort at concealment; since they were sure that theirs was a surprise visit.

"We'll leave our horses right here," came the strained voice of Jud Motley himself. "Crip Bloom can stay with 'em. The rest of us will go

through the pasture on foot, but we'll wait at the fence while the Eel sneaks in an' makes sure whether they're asleep or not."

"Do I git to set the fire?" queries the slimly Eel.

"Shore. But don't do it till after you come back an' report. Bat an' Van will carry the oil cans. If we can we want to git a good blaze goin' before they wake up, but the main thing is to make sure that nobody leaves that cabin alive."

"Do we go after old Tolson right away then?" asked a voice which Don heard only a few hours before. It belonged to the vicious gunman, Harry Tezak.

"No," Motley replied. "I've got other plans for Tolson. Tomorrow he'll git a story that'll bring him into Eden. He'll come after my hide, but it'll be his they'll find dryin' on the fence."

Don could imagine what that story would be. Tolson would be told that Fern was his daughter, and that she had been burned to death. He would lack proof, but he would know in his heart that Jud Motley was responsible. He would go back to Eden to finish what he had started that day, and he would be destroyed under circumstances which would tend to discredit the letter he had left with the warden of the penitentiary.

He waited to hear no more. The party was moving off through the brush, and he could see the small figure of the Eel darting on ahead. Don had changed his boots for a pair of moccasins belonging to Matt Dawson. He crawled through the brush a short distance until he was sure the man with the horses could not hear him, then he ran silently toward the house. He was fleet of foot, and fortunate the brush extended almost to the cabin. He reached there well ahead of the Eel.

The cabin was dark. Don waited outside until he saw the Eel creeping in stealthily toward the window of Dawson's room. As soon as the fellow gained that end of the cabin Don circled it from the other way. He waited at the corner where the fellow had disappeared. He was sure the little spy would not risk going around by the front.

Only a minute or two later the spy's head appeared around the corner of the logs. Don reached for him. Caught the lapel of his coat. The Eel was as hard to hold as the reptile he was named after. He seemed literally to twist his whole body inside his coat, and quick as lightning an ugly, long-bladed knife appeared in his hand. He emitted a half-scared, half-angry squawk, and struck out viciously with the knife.

Had it landed Don would have been dismboweled. But by a swift twist of his body one way, and a jerk of his assailant the other, Don saved himself. The end of the blade missed his stomach by not more than half an inch. Before the Eel could strike again Don's gun barrel crashed down upon his head. The vicious little fellow became a mere hunk of breathing but harmless flesh.

Bland's voice sounded from inside. "Don, is that you out there?"

"Yes," the puncher panted. "They're coming." He came around to the door, dragging the unconscious Eel by the scruff of the neck.

Mrs. Barry gave a scream at sight of the limp, inanimate form of the little killer.

"Be still," Don told her. "This critter was spyin' out the land. He was goin' back for some coal oil. They plan to burn the place and all of us in it."

"Oh, God ha' mercy," the woman began to pray.

"How many?" Doc asked coolly.

"Eight — not countin' this one and a fellow they call Crip who stayed with the horses."

"I told you I'd be killed," Dawson cried from his bedroom. "Gimme my gun."

"You'll be all right," Dr. Bland told him curtly. "Don and I can handle this situation perfectly all right. Mrs. Barry, get in there with him and stay. We'll promise you nobody gets close enough to build any fires."

Don looked with approval at the small, rather rolypoly doctor.

"What do you think will be the next step?" Bland asked.

"They'll be kinda up a stump when the Eel don't git back," Don answered. "By the way, let's tie him up. I think I put him to sleep for hours — the little murderer dang near ripped me open like a butchered hog — but we can't take any chances. They'll be some chary now about packin' in their coal-oil cans."

They soon had the Eel trussed up, and then they looked to their arms. Dr. Bland fondled lovingly a double-barreled shotgun belonging to Dawson. "I'm not so hot with a rifle, and I never used a revolver, but I've hunted enough ducks to use this thing," he declared pridefully. "Just let them get within range, and I'll make business for myself later picking number twelve shot out of their carcasses."

"Good," Don said. "Keep this rifle handy, too. I'll have my carbine an' six-gun."

Don stationed himself at one corner of the cabin, the doctor at the other. Fifteen or twenty minutes went by, and they began to think that the failure of the Eel to return might have frightened their enemies away. And then Don heard someone sneaking through the brush. A moment later he saw a shadowy form not over fifty yards from the back of the cabin.

Carefully he raised his carbine, but before he could fire the figure was obscured by a bush. It was a tribute to Dawson's shiftless ways that he had not even cleared the brush from his own backyard. A moment later Don saw another figure glide from behind a bush. He knew that Motley's whole crew was closing in. The Eel's absence had made them wary, even though no light showed in the cabin.

He raised his rifle and fired at the bush which he knew sheltered the

last sneaking form he had seen. A man leaped high into the air with an unearthly yell, and then thrashed wildly upon the ground.

But the answer to that lucky first shot was almost as disconcerting to Don. Scarcely had the boom of his rifle died away than a slug plunked into the logs within a foot of his body. The report of the rifle was from the stable. Some of the outlaws had succeeded in gaining that vantage point unseen, and from there they were able to command a view of the whole front of the cabin. For, in his usual backhanded manner of doing things, Dawson had built his stable and corrals in front of the house, simply because they were nearer to the road.

The front of the cabin had suddenly become untenable. So, too, was the end which Don had meant to guard. If he moved that way he would be exposed to the first of the man he had first sighted, and undoubtedly more men who were with him. He moved swiftly around to the other end to join the doctor. As he did so two bullets lashed into the logs.

"Don't try to go out of the front door, Mrs. Barry," he called, "you'll be shot down."

He had just time to reach the end where Dr. Bland waited when there came a stentorian yell from the lungs of Jud Motley:

"Come on, men, rush the cabin!"

## *Chapter* 15

FERN had not got far from home when her eagerness began to cool. She still felt tremendous relief at knowing she was not related to Dawson, but now she wondered how she would be received by her true father.

She rode on. The situation would have to be faced, but not as joyously as she had anticipated. Even in the darkness it was not hard to find the woodchopper's cabin. Before she came to it she passed tiers of yellow pine cordwood which Tolson had cut. She had heard that he was a tremendous worker.

The little ten-by-twelve cabin where the man lived was dark when she approached, but from time to time she saw a faint flicker of light leap against the windowpanes as though a fire in the stove was still flickering, or as though a man might be smoking a pipe. She rode boldly up to within twenty feet of the door and stopped. Immediately a deep, low voice challenged her from inside an open door.

"Who is that?"

"It — it's Fern," she answered. "Are — are you — Mr. Tolson?"

The big man stepped outside. She could see that he was carrying a loaded pipe. He had been smoking in the darkness.

"Matt Dawson's girl?" he queried. "What are you doing here?"

His voice sounded gruff. Tears welled to the girl's eyes.

"I came here," she said, "because I have reason to suppose that you are my father."

"What's that? Who told you that?" he barked. "Was it that young squirt, Fullmer?"

"No. It was Matt Dawson."

"Matt — Huh? What did you say?"

"Matt Dawson told me. He said —"

"Wait. We've got to talk this over," he said, his voice suddenly thin and unsteady. "Get down." He came over to the horse and took her arm when she swung down. She could feel his hand shake, yet his huge paw was singularly gentle.

"Better come inside, my dear," he said. "I'll make a light."

It took him several minutes before he could seem to locate a match. She didn't know it, but the big man was trying to get his feelings under control. There was not a doubt in his mind that the girl who had come to him out of the night was his daughter. But he was afraid.

Fern was standing in the doorway, a straight supple figure with a wistful, appealing face that reminded the man of another woman he had known — and loved.

"Sit down," he said hoarsely.

"We made Matt Dawson confess to a number of things this evening," the girl began when she had seated herself in one of the two hardbacked, rawhide-bottomed chairs in the cabin. "He said that you believed your daughter had died of pneumonia at the time your wife died. Instead of that he said that Jud Motley had saved the daughter, and later given her to Matt Dawson to raise — in such a way that she would always do anything Motley wanted her to do —"

Fern paused, but when the man said nothing she continued: "He said it was because, through me — I mean, through her — that Motley expected to get title to the Silver Chief mine."

Tolson looked up quickly. The quivering of the short, iron-gray beard which he had allowed to grow since leaving prison betrayed his nervousness.

"You say Motley wanted to *get* title to the Silver Chief?" he asked

"Yes. He said you believed your wife had lost the lawsuit."

"So he killed my wife, stole my baby, and then lied about it while I was helpless in prison," the man said as though talking to himself.

Fern stood up. "I am your daughter, aren't I?" she asked simply.

"Yes. God help you, you are," Tolson said, and his voice broke. The next moment they were sobbing in each other's arms. All their reticence was forgotten as they clung to each other.

"My little girl. My baby," Tolson murmured.

"Father! Never before in my life have I felt like I was saying that word right," Fern smiled through her tears.

"You've had a sad life, my little one," the man said brokenly. "And I'm afraid I can't do much to make it brighter."

"I have you now. That's all I want," she said. "Father, you acted like you didn't believe me when I came here tonight. Are you sure now that I am your daughter?"

"I was sure of it when I saw you this morning."

"You were? Then why didn't you say so?"

"I didn't know, of course. But I figgered this way: I'm just an old, broken-down jailbird. All I could bring my daughter is shame."

"But nothing could be worse than living with Matt Dawson. Besides, what do I care what people say about you so long as I know you're innocent? Even if you wasn't, you're still my father."

"I didn't mean to abandon you to Dawson," Tolson said. "I meant to get you out of his clutches, an' Jud Motley's, some way. Maybe I'd have had to kill 'em. I wouldn't have hesitated at that, an' I knew it would be better for you if you didn't know it was your father who did it."

"Oh, Father! Everything has been so wrong with both our lives," the girl cried. "But it's going to be different now. We'll go somewhere else and start all over again, together."

"Yes." Tolson seemed to relapse into a brown study. He seated himself on the bed, and rather fumblingly loaded his pipe. "You said Matt Dawson talked a lot. I'd kinda like to git it straight. If the Silver Chief still belongs to me I want it. Not that it could do me much good, but it would lift you out of poverty."

"I don't care about it either," Fern said hastily, "only it isn't right to let Jud Motley get away with it. If he caused my mother's death — Tell me about Mother. Did she look like me? And is my name Fern?"

"Your mother did look like you, only she was a little lighter both in complexion and weight. And your name ain't Fern. It's a kinda old-fashioned name, the same as your mother's — Mary."

"It's a wonderful name," the girl said. An irresistible impulse caused her to go over and sit herself on his lap. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"That," Tolson said, "was worth waitin' eighteen years for."

"Father," the girl said, "I hate to come back to the present and its troubles, but I've got to go back to — Dawson's."

"Never!" he roared. "You're through with that hellion forever."

"But this is different. There was one of Motley's spies who saw Dawson sign his confession. Don and Dr. Bland think Motley will come back and try to get the confession or try to kill Dawson and the rest of us. I told them I'd be back."

"Why didn't they get away if they found out they'd been spied on?"

"There was no place to go. Matt couldn't be abandoned, and he couldn't be moved."

"Yes, I see. Well, you're not goin' back there. You say right here, and I'll take your horse an' join that reception committee."

"No, Father," the girl refused. "I hate to disobey your first order, and in the future I'll promise to be an obedient daughter, but I've got to go back."

"Humph! I'll bet I'm the one to take all the orders," he growled. "But I'll like it. You win. You can go back, but you've got to keep out of danger."

He picked up his hat and rifle and they went outside. She swung gracefully into the saddle, and invited him to mount behind.

Tolson shook his head. "I used to ride a lot, but I'm more used to walkin' now. I reckon I can keep up."

"I'll never forget this day," she breathed. "Father, will you call me 'Mary'? I want to know how it sounds."

"All right, Mary. It sounds great to me," he smiled up at her.

"May I ask a favor?"

"Of course. Anything."

"Don't be too hard on Matt Dawson. I know he's a brute, but I'd hate it if anything else happened to him, and more than that I don't want you to do anything that would give Jud Motley a hold over you. I'm terribly afraid of that man. Now that I've got you I don't want to lose you again."

"It'll be hard not to give Dawson what he deserves, but if that's the way you feel about it he'll be safe from me," Tolson promised. "An' I can tell you I don't want to lose you again either."

They proceeded silently as they neared the Dawson place. The closer they got the more frightened she grew; yet nothing could have made her turn back. Not even the safety of her newly found father, although she dreaded taking him into danger.

Suddenly Tolson grabbed her bridle rein. "Listen!" he said tensely. From the direction of Dawson's cabin came the unmistakable sound of gunfire.

## *Chapter* 16

JUD MOTLEY plainly was determined to take the cabin. If Matt Dawson had talked, and signed a confession, it constituted a dire threat to the cowman's supremacy in the Eden country, and his liberty as well. There was murder in his heart toward this henchman who had been foolish enough to get himself shot, and rendered helpless, but Motley's rage also included the two young men who had been bold enough to defy him.

He had not taken Dr. Bland seriously, because he had to all intents and purposes driven the doctor out of the country. Had not Matt

Dawson got hurt, Bland would have been gone. It was this stray cowhand, this saddle bum, against whom his rage was really directed. He blamed Don Fullmer for this latest disaster, and before leaving town he had given the sycophantic deputy sheriff, Bruce Coates, a terrific dressing down for not having placed Fullmer under arrest for the shooting of Matt Dawson.

"Git Fullmer, no matter who else you git," he told his followers before they left town.

"What about the girl?" somebody asked him.

Motley's jaws worked convulsively. For years he had counted on making Ad Tolson's daughter his virtual slave for purely financial reasons, but when she had begun to take on signs of grace and beauty other dark, evil passions had begun to work within him, until for the last two years he had constantly been at Matt Dawson to compel the girl to marry him. He hated to give her up. Yet Tug Hopkins, his spy, had heard practically every word that had been spoken while Dawson was telling his story, and Motley realized that he would never get the girl through marriage. His spurious respectability, so long as he could maintain it, forbade his trying to get her any other way.

"She knows too much now," he answered harshly. "The whole lot of 'em, includin' that nurse, will have to be wiped out. It's too bad, but it can't be helped."

When the Eel failed to return Motley knew that something was wrong. He caught Tug Hopkins by the back of the neck, and threatened him with a ponderous fist.

"Damn yuh, yuh musta let 'em find out yuh was there," he rasped. "They're warned an' lookin' fer us. If I knew fer sure it was yore fault I'd break yore neck right now like a pipestem."

"I tell yuh they couldn't have heard me," Hopkins defended himself desperately.

Motley let him go. "Well, it can't be helped now," he said. "They couldn't have moved Dawson so we'll shut his mouth, an' git the rest of 'em if they're still here."

With Dawson dead he had little to fear. He still had the man's statement that Don Fullmer had shot him. It would be easy to prove that Fullmer had forced the man to tell another story while he lay helpless if his confession ever came to light. He could handle the rest of them, including Ad Tolson.

His first indication that his victory was not to be an easy one came with Don Fullmer's shot, which had caught the unfortunate Levi Bunch squarely in the stomach. Motley realize then that his only chance was to rush the cabin and get it over with quickly.

At that Motley was wise enough not to lead the assault himself. At the proper moment he stumbled, and allowed two of his men to pass him. It was these two men who got the full benefit of both barrels of

Dr. Bland's shotgun as they rounded the corner of the cabin. The doctor had held the weapon so that the load was distributed, although one man got more of the charge than the other.

Both men yelled with dismay and pain, but one leaped high into the air, while the other went down on hands and knees.

"Grab the rifle, Doc. Watch those fellows in front," Don said tersely, and leaped past the doctor to face Jud Motley.

Don's six-gun was in his hand. It was pointed toward the big man. But Motley struck the gun aside with a blow as quick and powerful as that of a grizzly bear. It was the first time anything like that had ever happened to Don. His bullet whizzed harmlessly past Motley's side. He realized then that he had underestimated Motley's fighting ability, but he had no time to waste thinking. Motley's gun was coming up.

Don reached for his enemy's gun wrist, at the same time launching a healthy kick at Motley's shin.

"Damn you!" Motley roared in protest.

Don jerked his own gun back, but Motley was grabbing for it wildly. He couldn't shoot. Even as they struggled Don got a glimpse of the face of the man who had got part of Doc's load of birdshot. It was a bearded face, drawn into a grimace of pain; yet Don remembered where he had seen it before. He was one of the three men he had seen at his sister's place when they had come to protest against her selling out and leaving them at the mercy of Jud Motley. The man's name was Vanwormser. Undoubtedly he was one of the men who had been ordered to carry a coal-oil can a few minutes before. The man was pawing frantically at one side of his face where some of the birdshot had taken effect, but Don realized that when the first shock of his pain was over he would probably again take a hand in the battle. He was a short, thick man, the fellow who had fallen had been tall and lank. Doc, apparently, had aimed high.

Don could hear Dr. Bland at the corner of the cabin behind him, pumping bullets toward the stable. The puncher knew that he had to terminate the encounter with Motley quickly. He got hold of Motley's gun wrist, but strong as he was he realized that he was no match for his foe when it came to a matter of brute strength. And Motley was also fast.

Suddenly he felt Motley grasp his, Don's, gun by the end of the barrel. Instantly, then, Don went over backward. Motley couldn't let go his hold quickly enough, and he was jerked forward. Suddenly he found both the puncher's feet under his flanks. Don gave a tremendous heave, exerting every ounce of strength in his body, and catapulted his foe clear over his head and behind him. The big boss of Eden landed with a terrific thump on the hard ground. The breath knocked completely out of him.

The puncher was on his feet with the quickness of a cat. He brought his boot heel down hard upon Motley's wrist. He forced the man's fingers open. He bent over and got possession of the big man's gun. Even while stooped he caught a glimpse of Vanwormser out of the corner of his eye, as the fellow awkardly and unsteadily raised his belt gun.

Without straightening up, Don whirled toward the fellow, and raised his gun. But he didn't fire at Vanwormser. Another man had stepped around the corner, and his gun was higher than was the rancher's. Had Don's turn been a quarter of a second slower he would have been a dead man. He had no time to aim. He had to take his chances with the rancher and chance a shot from the hip at this new foe, whom, even as he pressed the trigger, he recognized as Deputy Sheriff Bruce Coates.

The two shots came exactly together. Coates had taken aim, but Don's swift turn startled him. A bullet tore through the flesh of Don's right arm just above the biceps. It felt as if a hot branding iron had been plastered against him. At the same time he saw Coates double over and drop his gun.

A slug from Vanwormser's gun crashed through the window of the room where Matt Dawson lay, as the fellow missed his shot at Don. The puncher could have killed the man in his tracks, but he didn't want to. "Reach!" he ordered, as he swung the weapon he had taken from Motley to cover the rancher. Vanwormser dropped his gun and reached.

An ejaculation from Dr. Bland caused Don to look around quickly. Anticipating that this corner would see most of the action the two men had built a sort of barricade, using a wash bench, a mattress, and several sacks of chicken feed. It had afforded shelter for Doc, except when he had to rise up to fire.

"Doc, are you hurt?" Don cried.

Dr. Bland was slumped back on his seat, back against the wall. "Arm's dead," he said. "Be all right in a minute. Give me your short gun. You handle the rifle. They're raking hell out of this side. One fellow still at the barn, another out there by that old machinery — think he's tryin' to flank us, and pour it on from the side. And there's another damned buzzard I can't see shootin' right along the front of the house. Be careful not to lean over or he'll get you."

Don hesitated only a moment, then he handed Doc his six-gun and picked up the rifle where it had fallen. "You watch these fellows," he said, but when he turned all he saw was the tail of Jud Motley's coat as the cowman loped around the corner. Deputy Coates and Vanwormser had already preceded him.

"It's all right, Doc," he said. "You just sit there and don't let anybody come around the corner."

The man pouring in the cross-fire was the most dangerous. He was able to keep Don from commanding a view of the door, while the man at the stable kept him from leaving the shelter. The third man, who had already partly succeeded in his flanking movements, would undoubtedly keep on; but what Don feared most was that Motley or some of the others, would reach the front door by coming around the other way, and thus get into the cabin.

He could still get into the cabin, by way of Dawson's window. He and the doctor might have to do it as a last resort, but if they did Motley would be able to carry out his plan to set fire to the cabin. For all he knew the cowman and the two who had fled with him, might even now be bringing up their coal oil to set fire to the back of the house. They had that side of the field to themselves.

He voiced his apprehension to Doc. "Can you manage to sneak over to the other corner?" he asked. "Be careful they don't get you."

Doc got to his feet, and hugging the wall slid along to where he could peer around the corner. One of the men whom he had got with the shotgun was still lying there. Weird sounds had been coming from him, but now the man lay still. The doctor's practiced eye told him the fellow was dead.

The man at the stable was still firing right above the mattress barricade with remarkable accuracy. Every so often the man hidden in the old machinery, where earlier in the evening Don and Mary had concealed Dawson's confession, joined in. Fortunately for the beleaguered men they were on the darkest side of the house.

Don widened a crack between two of the grain sacks and thrust his rifle through. At the flash of a gun from the stable he fired. But hardly had the reverberation of his shot died away when the man at the end of the house fired a shot which Don knew must have grazed the front of the building all the way. This, he guessed, was the first man he had seen when the battle began. He didn't know it then, but the man was Dutch Schiller.

A rifle ball slapped into the corner of the house. The man out among the derelict farm implements had made a little more headway. Don was equally quick, and his return shot brought a clearly audible oath, which sounded, however, more annoyed than injured.

For the next two minutes Don fired almost steadily. Each time he fired it would bring a reply from the fellow he had not shot at. When he shifted aim the other outlaw would fire. And Dutch Schiller was firing just often enough to keep Don from timing his shots.

Behind him Don could hear Dr. Bland using the six-gun. "How yuh comin', Doc?" he called.

"We're holding 'em," came the doctor's reply.

From inside the cabin there issued a strange assortment of sounds. A constant flow of profanity bubbled from Matt Dawson's lips, which

Mrs. Barry appeared to be trying to drown out with prayer. Poor Mrs. Barry! Don felt sorry for her, but if she had been permitted to leave the cabin she would have endangered the lives of the rest of them, as well as her own.

Then, just as Don fired a shot, a bullet from the gun of the man conducting the cross-fire, struck his rifle along the side of the magazine. The force was such that the puncher's arm was momentarily numbed clear to the shoulder. The bullet ricocheted away with a whine which must have told Schiller he had scored a hit. The man's voice rose triumphantly.

"We've got 'em licked, boys," he yelled. "Don't let anybody run away. We've set her a-fire."

"I can smell smoke, Don," Dr. Bland called. "It's at the other end of the house."

It was true. The outlaws had fired the west end of the house, which the defenders had been unble to guard. That, undoubtedly, had been the work of Motley, Coates, and Vanwormser. Don blamed himself that he had not, somehow, managed to kill all three of them. Yet he and the doctor had already accomplished more than seemed humanly possible.

"Mrs. Barry! Mrs. Barry!" screamed Matt Dawson. "Help me outa here. I've gotta git out of here."

For a moment Don's brain had been as benumbed as his arm. Everything had seemed hopeless and lost. Now it began to function again.

"Be still, Dawson," he called. "You'll both be shot the minute you try to leave the house."

Life was coming back into his arm. The rifle, he supposed, was useless, and might explode if he fired it again, but he still had his carbine, and Motley's six-gun. He moved over to where Dr. Bland knelt.

"Change places with me, Doc," he said, "I'm goin' around the back here, an' have it out with them. I know where that bushwhackin' skunk is located now, and if Motley is around there enjoying his fire he'll wake up in one a damn' sighter hotter."

It was a long, desperate chance he was taking. If there was another one of the outlaws lurking in the brush he might be picked off before he reached the other end of the cabin. Even if he reached it he would have at least four men to fight. But it was the only chance. He would use the carbine first, and then resort to the six-gun so long as he had strength to pull a trigger.

He had no more than started, however, before there came a wild yell of alarm from Dutch Schiller.

"Hey, yuh damn' fool, yo're shootin' at me. Hey! Jud, look out! There's somebody shootin' at us from the stable."

Don put on a burst of speed and reached the west end of the house

without being shot at. The whole end of the cabin was ablaze where two five-gallon cans of coal oil had ben dashed against the logs and set on fire. But in the radius of light he could see four men running wildly for the shelter of the nearest brush, while a steady succession of powder flashes stabbed out at them from the stable as fast as a man located there could pull the trigger.

With a right good will Don threw the carbine to his shoulder and joined in the bombardment.

## *Chapter* 17

AD TOLSON has not hesitated after he heard the firing.

"Jud Motley is there all right," he told his daughter. "I'll take a hand in this, but you stay right here. This is no kind of business for a woman. The worst thing you could do for your friends would be to let that Motley gang see you."

Before Mary could reply he was off. He left the road and ran straight toward the sound of firing. The girl hesitated. She knew there was wisdom in her father's words. There was nothing a girl could do — yet. But she couldn't bear to remain inactive. She rode her pony a short distance from the road and dismounted. Then set out on foot to follow her father.

At the top of a steep incline overlooking the stable and corrals Ad Tolson stopped to get the drift of the battle. When he went on he was no longer in a hurry.

He has ascertained that there was but one man at the stable. It was undoubtedly one of Motley's men, and that was all he wanted to know. Without making a sound he slipped through the open window into the hay manger, and on across. It was dark in there, but a man was standing on the inside, firing through a crack in the logs a little below breast high.

A mighty hand fastened upon the back of Harry Tezak's neck. The fellow let out a squeak like a captured rat, dropped his rifle, and tried to draw his belt gun as he whirled to fight. But before he could even lay hand upon his six-gun he was jerked away from the wall. Then, his head was propelled back against it with the force of a battering ram. There was a hollow sound as head met log. The fellow went limp in Tolson's grasp.

Tolson had not even dropped his rifle. He stepped hastily on the stable door. The house was already on fire, and he could see several men faintly outlined in the firelight. But a man not far away had betrayed his whereabouts by shooting along the front of the cabin. Tolson fired at the point the shot had originated from, and elicited the alarmed yell from Dutch Schiller which Don Fullmer had heard.

The second shot brought Schiller out of his nest. Before he could decide what to do Don opened up from the corner of the cabin at the others. The entire bunch on that side, utterly demoralized, were legging it toward the shelter of the brush, and their horses.

Don emptied his carbine at the fleeing men. He was tempted to pursue them on their horses, and at least cut off the man who had been so annoying at the southeast corner, but quickly decided against it. He was sure that the attack would not be renewed. The immediate problem was to try to put out the fire. The profane yells of the Eel were now added to the lamentations and curses of Mrs. Barry and Matt Dawson on the inside of the cabin.

The logs, however, were dry as tinder. One good look showed the utter futility of trying to put out the fire. The important thing was to get the people out of the house. Don ran back to Dr. Bland.

"Can't save the cabin," he said. "I'll carry Dawson outside."

"He's got to have bedding," the doctor said crisply. "Have Mrs. Barry carry it out. I'll get my own kit."

Ad Tolson had come nearer the cabin in pursuit of the fleeing outlaws. Don called out to him.

"Look after yore people — I'll take care o' Motley's gang," the big woodchopper answered back.

Both of Don's arms ached from his injuries, but he bent over the bed and picked up Dawson. "Fine set of friends you selected, Dawson," he said crisply. "Nice friendly little calls they make."

Dawson's answer was a curse.

As Don turned toward the door he came face to face with Mary. "What are you doing here?" he blurted. "The danger ain't over."

"I didn't get to help any in the fighting. I want to make myself useful now," she told him.

"You saved our bacon when you brought Tolson here, but if you've got anything you value in here you'd better grab it."

It was Matt Dawson's clothes, however, which the girl brought out first. She made a second trip into what had now become a raging inferno to secure some article which Dawson begged her to bring out. Meanwhile, Don placed the crippled man on the ground, dashed back to bring first the Eel, and then another armload of bedding; Mrs. Barry having rushed out screaming with one pillow in her arms. It was impossible for anyone to go in there again.

The firing had ceased, but suddenly it broke out again where the outlaws had left their horses. Evidently Tolson had caught up with his enemies. Don hoped that the man might bring Jud Motley within range of his gun, but the odds were that Tolson himself might get killed.

They carried Dawson out toward the stable, just beyond the radius

of the licht from the burning building, and made him as comfortable as possible. The rest gathered around, watching the fire.

Once, as they were gathered there, Don thought he heard something in the stable, but he was busy at something else and decided it was some animal. He was about to go in search of Ad Tolson when a shot sounded from out the darkness, and a bullet seared Don's ribs, and missed Mary by no more than an inch. It was a revover shot, and it had come from the trees behind the stable.

Don grabbed his six-gun and rushed in pursuit. The others scattered, but there were no more shot.

Don circled the stable and reached the edge of the timber and brush, but could see nothing of the sniper. He listened a moment. Thought he heard someone running. There had been only that one outburst of gunfire from the road.

He didn't hesitate. Dangerous though he knew it to be he kept on, making enough noise to warn Tolson to be careful. As soon as he was beyond earshot of the others in the yard, he called out, not too loudly: "He's down your way, Doc, I'll get over toward the road an' we'll head him into Tolson. The sucker can't get away."

The ruse worked. He heard a sudden crashing in the brush as a man took to his heels. Don followed for some distance. He heard the fellow vent an oath as he reached the spot where the horses had been left, and found no animals there. The Motley rider did not tarry, but crossed the road and plunged into thicker timber.

When Don returned to the others nothing remained of the cabin but a smoldering heap of ruin. Tolson had got back before him, and now stood with his arm around his daughter. Don needed but a glance to know that there was now perfect understanding between them.

"We've got you to thank for getting us out of a mighty hot jack pot, Mr. Tolson," Don said.

"Don't thank me. If there's any thanks they go to Mary," Tolson said.

"Mary?"

"My daughter."

"Oh, I see."

"The name 'Fern' has gone up in smoke along with the cabin," the girl smiled. "You'll have to get used to my new name."

"At least it's one we've heard before," Dr. Bland said. "Now, I suppose, we can count up our casualties."

He was the main one himself, for one arm hung broken and useless; yet he managed to attend to Dawson, and now demanded that Don stand wound inspection.

"Not till we get that arm of yours bound up," Don said firmly. "I've got nothing but a couple of scratches."

Dr. Bland, Don thought, was much of a man. The rolypoly doctor

didn't look like a fighting man, but he had certainly proved himself that night. He stood now, coolly directing the dressing of his wounded arm.

It was Don's turn then. He had two slight flesh wounds, one in the arm, one along the side; neither dangerous. His other shoulder had been wrenched and bruised. When these hurts had been bound up Don and Tolson searched the premises. They found two dead men. One, the unseen man whom Don had fired his first shot at, proved to be Levi Bunch, the bouncer from the *Cowhand's Delight*. The other dead man was also a bouncer from the same place, a man whom Bland identified as one Bat Sully.

They knew that at least two others of their enemies had been wounded. Vanwormser had received part of the charge which had killed Sully, and Deputy Sheriff Coates had also absorbed a bullet.

"I wonder," Don remarked, "what Jud Motley will do now?"

"Jud Motley will never quit fightin' till he's dead," Tolson said. "I know him. He's still wealthy and powerful and ruthless. When he can no longer fight inside the law he'll fight out of it. There's only one way to stop him."

The clinching of the big man's hands plainly indicated what he thought that way to be.

"What about me?" Matt Dawson demanded. "If you take me down to Eden they'll kill me."

"I hardly think so, my friend," Dr. Bland said. "Motley shot that bolt tonight. He won't dare to do anything in broad daylight, and once you're down there we can find protection for you. There are still decent people in Eden."

It was not Matt Dawson, but the Tolsons whom Don was worried about. Ad Tolson was a marked man. Don suspected, too, that Motley would make a mighty effort to smash Fanny Carlton, and the other ranchers whom he was trying to break.

This meant that he must get over the mountain as soon as he could to defend Fanny's property from attack. He urged the Tolsons to go with him.

"You can't stay up there in that cabin," he argued. "I'll bet that Motley had it all planned to attack there just as soon as he wiped us out. The only thing for you to do is come with me. I can answer for my sister's welcome."

"But not for her sister-in-law's," Mary pointed out.

"Who gives a damn?" he demanded indignantly. "She doesn't own the place. If she don't like the way Fanny runs things she can leave."

"I reckon it wouldn't do," Tolson said. "But thanks just the same for your interest."

"But surely now that you've got Dawson's confession you'll make

an attempt to get your mine back, and make Motley account for the profits," Don said.

Tolson stood looking down at the man who had robbed him of his daughter for so many years. Matt Dawson quailed.

"It'll do no good till Motley is licked," Tolson said. "All Dawson did was give us some information. If we try to put him on the stand while Motley is still alive he'll swear everything he told us was a lie. But my feud with Jud Motley has been revived, an' this time it's got to go to a finish."

"Father, the only thing I want is you vindication," Mary cried. "You didn't kill that man Coulter. It's got to be proved that you didn't."

It was coming dawn. Don went out in the pasture and caught Blackie. Riding bareback he drove in Dawson's team. Regardless of other dangers Dawson would have to be taken to Eden, and to insure against an attack everybody was going along. What would happen when they got there nobody knew. Don hitched the team to a rickety old buckboard, and they loaded Dawson in the back. Tolson drove, with Mrs. Barry in the seat beside him. Dr. Bland remained in the back with his patient, while Don and Mary rode their horses along behind. Their last act before leaving was to cut loose the unspeakable little Eel, and leave him to wander back to Eden the best way he could.

## *Chapter* 18

A MAN sore in body and seething in spirit was Jud Motley when he got back to Eden. Wiping out the Dawson cabin with all its inmates had been a desperate thing to attempt. He was wise enough to know that there might have been repercussions even if the job had been successful. He had not counted upon failure.

Four of the ten men he had brought along had not returned, and he didn't know whether they were dead or not. Two of the others, Coates and Vanwormser, were badly hurt. Only Schiller, Mays, Hopkins, and Crip Bloom were unhurt.

Motley's horse was badly winded when he got back to Eden. He had planned to raid Ad Tolson's cabin after the Dawson business was over. Now he had to recognize that he would have a wronged and vengeful Tolson to deal with. His throat muscles still hurt from the mangling he had received from his foe's powerful fingers.

"He'll never git that chance again," he muttered thickly, but it didn't check his retreat until he was back in his office in the rear of the *Cowhand's Delight.*

It was not long before he was joined by Schiller and Mays. Coates and Vanwormser came in soon after; the latter with the whole left

side of his face covered with blood; Coates walking bent over with a hand pressed against his side.

"We walked into something," Rick Mays commented needlessly.

"It was a mistake. You oughta let me arrest Fullmer an' that damned girl, then wiped out Dawson an' the doc," Coates said. "Now I'm shot, an' there ain't a damn' doctor in town. Whatammagonna do?"

"Me, too," Vanwormser whined. "Look at my face. My head's full o' shot."

"An' sawdust," Rick Mays added.

Jud Motley had not yet spoken. He roused himself now. "We lost," he said. "I s'pose it was that damn' Tug Hopkins' fault, or mebbe the Eel's. Anyway, they found out we was comin'. But I ain't licked. I'm paying you fellers big money—a lot bigger than you could git anywhere else, an' I expect yuh to earn it."

"Some of our boys got killed up there. How we gonna explain things?" Coates inquired. "You know that old Judge Vane an' his friends would like nothin' better than puttin' the skids under us."

"Hell, you went up there to arrest Fullmer, an' he resisted. The rest were just part of the posse," Motley said. "The cabin will burn down. They'll have to bring Dawson down here. I'll see him, I don't think he dares talk if he thinks I can git at him. I'll make him deny everything. The trouble is Ad Tolson knows that I didn't git a clear title to some property we had a law suit about years ago. He'll try to git damages. An' he knows now that girl is his daughter."

"Boss," Dutch Schiller spoke up, "I've told you a dozen times that I'd git rid of Tolson for yuh the minute yuh said the word."

"I know. I had a reason fer keepin' him alive. I still don't want him killed, but I want him scotched. The way to git at him now is through his girl."

"I can't say I like that," Dutch Schiller returned sullenly. "I'll fight any man yuh say, but gittin' mixed up with women is different."

"I don't mean what you think," Motley said. "They can't be together all the time. It'll be easy to tell Tolson his girl needs him, but he won't find her there when he arrives."

"What about Harry—and the others we left up there?" Rick Mays answered. "Looks to me like he was in fer plenty of trouble with the law."

"I'll handle the law," Motley said harshly. "We won't do anything about those fellows till tomorrow. Want to see if they don't bring Dawson down here first."

Crip Bloom stuck his head timidly into the room while they talked. Motley bellowed at him: "Go find Tom Hinkle an' bring him here. Rout him out of bed."

When the fellow disappeared Motley turned to the others. "Go git your wounds fixed up some way," he told Coates and Vanwormser.

"Dutch, you an' Rick stick around town till we see whether they bring Dawson in or not. Then go back to camp, an' git in touch with Churchill. If Vanwormser was recognized last night there may be some danger. I'm goin' to smash that Carlton outfit an' them nesters on Burnt Crick so damn' quick they won't be able to git their breath. That'll show Vane an' the rest of those milksops around here that I'm not to be trifled with."

"That's talkin' my language," Dutch said with a pleased grin.

The others had gone when Crip Bloom returned with the tall, angular lawyer. Motley waved the clubfooted messenger away, and closed the door.

"Things seem to have gone slightly awry tonight," Hinkle said sympathetically.

"Hinkle, I'm gittin' damn' tired of dealin' with weaklin's," Motley snarled. "Things come near going to hell tonight, an' all because a couple of weak sisters who forgot who they was workin' for. There's some excuse for Dawson. He was sick and helpless. But that damn' brother of yours was only drunk when Ad Tolson got hold of him an' got that confession. Ain't that a hell of a thing to have layin' around in the warden's office in the penitentiary? Now Dawson has confessed, an' if anything happens to Tolson you brother Alf will go up for life for killin' Coulter, an' you an' me will likely go as accessories. If Tolson don't die he'll claim the Silver Chief an' lay claim to all I've got because it was started with profits I got from a mine that didn't belong to me. Do you see what kind of shape we're in?"

"It's serious, Jud, but not without hope," the lawyer answered judiciously. "Let's assume the worst—that Tolson dies. Dawson's confession is only corroboratory. He perjured himself as a witness, and he may say that you or I paid him money to do so. But it will have no effect unless it can be proved that Tolson was innocent. All we have to prove is that Dawson was under duress. You know very well that Matt won't dare swear against you on the stand."

"That's right."

"Now about Alf. I know he's a drunkard, but he had no choice about signing that confession. Tolson would have broken his neck. But I've got a later confession from Alf, swearing that anything he signed with regard to the Coulter murder was a lie. But that's not all. Three years ago I defended a man who was sent up for forgery. The only chance that man has of getting an early pardon is through me. He's now a trusty in the warden's office. I've told him to get that sealed envelope Ad Tolson sent to the warden. He knows that if he can get it he'll get out several years sooner that he will if he don't. I'm expecting that envelope any day."

A smile cracked Motley's coarse features, the first time he had smiled

in a long while. "That's what I want," he said. "That's the only thing I'm afraid of. I can handle Dawson."

"The thing I'm afraid of," Hinkle said presently, "is that all this may be dragged into court when Tolson sues you for the profits from the Silver Chief. You say the mine is practically worked out. Why not compromise with Tolson? Give him the mine if he'll drop his claim for damages."

"No. I'll compromise nothing with Ad Tolson," Motley thundered. "Besides, I can git fifty thousand dollars from a sucker in the East the minute I can git title to the mine. But if I can't git it I'll make sure that Tolson don't. What I want you to do is git ready to fight Tolson in the courts. Use all the money you want. Bribe the judges, intimidate the jury—do anything. Just see to it that Ad Tolson doesn't ever git a dollar from that mine."

Even Tom Hinkle, disreputable as he was, could not understand the fury of the hatred which Motley had for Ad Tolson. Only one person besides Motley knew the reason, and that was Ad Tolson himself. In the past lives of these two men was a chapter which neither would ever mention so long as he lived. But Jud Motley had once loved the woman whom Ad Tolson married.

There had been nothing mutual about it. Mary Lane had never cared for Motley; had, in fact, despised him. But his infatuation had not been cured until after her marriage with Ad Tolson. Then it had turned to hatred against them both. Motley had set himself to ruin his successful rival, and he had succeeded. He had driven the girl who had spurned him into bitterest poverty, and an early death. Not content even with this he had stolen their child, and had her brought up by the bestial Matt Dawson.

In time he had come to anticipate an even richer revenge by marrying that daughter. But he had taken no chances on her refusal. He had instructed Matt Dawson to break her spirit until she would submit to anything which her oppressors desired. But there, once again, Jud Motley had failed.

It would be better, he told himself, for Ad Tolson and his daughter not to push him too far. If ever he had to leave Eden he was resolved that Mary Tolson should go with him. In other words Judson Motley meant to rule or ruin.

## *Chapter* 19

THE sun was little more than an hour high when the little cavalcade from Matt Dawson's place arrived in Eden. There were few people on the streets, but they knew that there were spies watching them. They stopped once and Mrs. Barry climbed hastily down over

the wheel, and hurried toward her own home. She made it definitely plain that she had had enough.

They drove on to Dr. Bland's little green house, and carried the crippled man inside.

"If you don't like it here, maybe we can have you moved," the doctor told him.

"There's no place you can take me in this town that Jud Motley can't find me," the man said pessimistically.

"Nor where I can't either," Ad Tolson remarked grimly.

"It's foolish for you folks to go back to that cabin," Dr. Bland told the Tolsons. "There's plenty of room right here, and I'll need Mary to help take care of my patient for a while."

It was the sensible thing, and they all knew it. Yet Don felt a twinge of jealousy as he realized that this would throw Mary into constant contact with the likable doctor. Eden was no place for him. Even now he should be on his way back to Fanny's, but he wanted to wait long enough to find out what his enemies intended to do.

They had not a great while to wait. A clerkish-looking young fellow approached the green house. He was a little scared.

"Dr. Bland," he said, "Deputy Bruce Coates sent me down here. He got shot last night, and he wants you to dress his wound. There's no other doctor in town."

"He rode down here from Dawson's after he was shot. It won't hurt him to walk over here," the doctor said curtly. "Is anybody else in town hurt?"

"Why, yes. A nester named Vanwormser from Burnt Crick has got a bad head. I heard them say that several other fellows from the *Cowhand's Delight* had got killed."

Twenty minutes later Deputy Coates, Vanwormser, and two other men with stars on their vests approached the house.

"The nerve of him," Doc said. "If he'd had his way there wouldn't have been any doctor in town. You'd better keep out of sight, Don. Those other fellows are Herman Kiel, another deputy sheriff, and Johnny Eglison, the town marshal. Kiel may be all right, but look out for Johnny."

"I think I'll stick," Don said grimly. "If they want to bluff it through about me shootin' Dawson I'll call their hand."

The men stopped at the front door. "We want to git patched up, Doc," Coates said.

"That so? What do those other two want?" Doc asked shortly.

"They—they just come along. In case one of us needed help. I lost a lotta blood, Doc."

"Where?"

"Guess there's no use stallin'," Coates said, trying hard to conceal his humiliation. "I reckon you know as much about that as I do. I

took a posse up to Matt Dawson's last night to arrest Don Fullmer. We were surprised, and I'm afraid some of my men were killed."

"That so? Killin' an officer in pursuit of his duty is a pretty serious matter, I'm told."

"You bet it is," Coates corroborated.

"It's a funny thing," the doctor went on. "I was with Fullmer all evening. I didn't hear a soul tell Fullmer he was under arrest. In fact, we were all attacked by a party of ruffians who tried to murder us all, and did burn the cabin down. Of course *you* wasn't with that party."

Coates hesitated. "No-o," he said finally. "O' course not."

"Well, that settles that," Dr. Bland murmured. "Now about Don. He's right here. But you were aiming to arrest him for shooting Dawson, were you not?"

"Yes, that's it."

"But now Dawson has repudiated his statement that Don shot him, and admits that he shot himself. That right, Matt?"

"Yeh, that's right," Matt Dawson growled.

"So, you see," the doctor smiled brightly, "there you are."

"I—I—guess it was all a mistake," the deputy said unhappily.

"I've only got one arm myself, but I don't believe we'll need your friends," the doctor said. "Fern—I mean Mary—and Don will be all the help I'll need."

The other two officers, looking somewhat bewildered, took their departure.

"Well, that's the first round," Dr. Bland remarked, as half an hour later the two wounded men left the house.

Vanwormser was sullen and suspicious. He knew very well that the man painfully picking birdshot out of his scalp with one hand was the man who had planted them there. He seemed to be expecting the doctor to finish the job with some deft death-stroke at any moment. Don questioned the man.

"Let me see, Vanwormser, you were one of the three men who came to my sister's the other evening to beg her to hold out against Motly, wasn't you? Own a small ranch below her's, don't you?"

"That's right," the fellow granted.

"How come you to git mixed up in this business last night?"

"All I know is I happened to be in town, an' Coates drafted me as a member of his posse," the man replied sullenly.

"Well, well," Don grinned, his tone expressing all the skepticism in the world. He knew that there was something wrong with Vanwormser. Dick Carlton had given his life to protect just such men as he. Even now the fellow owed Fanny money, yet he was plainly a tool for Jud Motley.

"There's one sure thing," Dr. Bland told the others later. "Motley is not going to resort to the law about last night's business. We've got

him headed off there, and I believe that's always been one of his chief weapons. Once we get him outside the law we'll have him going."

A remarkable change had come over Mary in twenty-four hours. From a beaten child she had become a confident grown woman. In every way she looked more mature, more capable. Already she had taken her father under her wing, and seemed the dominant one of the two.

"If Motley is on the wrong side of the law then let's us get on the right side," the girl said. "Father, why don't you go have a talk with Judge Vane?"

"I think I will," Tolson said. "Want to go with me?"

Mary hesitated a moment. "Let Don go," she said. "Somebody should stay here and help the doctor."

"Yes, I'd like you to," Tolson addressed Don.

The puncher got his hat. It looked as if Mary wanted to get him out of the house so she could be alone with Bland. Well, he couldn't blame her. Bland's wife had left him. He would soon be able to get a divorce, and he would be a good husband to Mary. But there was an emptiness in his heart which he no longer tried to dissemble. Doc was a fine man, and Don resolved that under no circumstances would he become his rival.

They had only to tell Judge Van about the events of the previous night to gain his undivided attention. He made no comment until he had got all of Tolson's story.

"Jud Motley must be pretty desperate if he had to resort to that sort of tactics, although he hasn't had that crew of thugs and gunmen on his payroll all this time just because he admires their beauty. What I'm afraid of, Tolson, is that you and your daughter may find yourselves in personal danger."

"But won't that confession of Alf Hinkle's in the warden's office protect them from that?" Don queried.

"I'm afraid that won't be much help. Hinkle will claim duress if the confession is made public. If he were to be tried he'd win an acquittal. Tolson took the very best step he could in trying to use it to frighten Motley. But it may not work. It seems clear that we can get back the Silver Chief mine. I understand, however, that it has been closed down for some time, and is probably valueless. Making Motley account for the profits is something else again. It's involved in litigation, and will probably take years. Nevertheless, I think we should bring suit at once, if you agree, Mr. Tolson."

"Go ahead," Tolson said. "If it wasn't for my daughter I'd deal with Motley another way."

"You can depend upon me to do anything in my power to break the stranglehold Jud Motley has on this country," Vane promised them.

"There's one little job I wish you'd do for me, Judge," Don request-

ed. "There's a feilow over on Burnt Creek named Vanwormser. I've got a suspicion he's secretly sold out to Motley. If it don't appear on the records I'm going to have my sister demand a mortgage for security on the money he owes her. That ought to drive him into the open, hadn't it?"

"It will," Vane replied. "I'll fix up a mortgage for you to take along, and I can let you know in half an hour whether or not Motley has title to his ranch."

Tolson returned to the doctor's house, but Don turned his steps toward the *Cowhand's Delight*. He knew it was dangerous, but he couldn't leave town yet, and he didn't want to go back to Bland's house.

There were only five men inside the saloon, but at least three of them had good cause to remember the puncher. One was Ed Spool, the bartender; the other two were Dutch Schiller and Rick Mays. A bombshell exploding in the middle of the floor could hardly have surprised them more than Fullmer's appearance. Involuntarily, they looked to see if anybody was with him. They could hardly comprehend the courage, or the foolhardiness, which could cause him to invade those precincts.

Schiller and Mays were seated at a card table, but they were neither playing nor drinking. Don nodded to them. "Nice little brush we had last night?" he said. "You fellows have a drink with me?"

Dutch Schiller studied the puncher for a moment, then he and Mays approached the bar. "Why not?" he asked. "You won't be buyin' drinks much longer, so we'd just as well get the benefit of your money while it lasts."

"You don't mean you'd try bushwackin' me, do you?" Don queried. "What'll you have? Make mine whisky, barkeep. You know you didn't have much luck last night."

"Me, too," Schiller said to the bartender, with a nod at the whisky bottle. "No, you kinda got the jump on us. Reckon you did git a little the best of it. But it won't be that way the next time."

"Well, here's to a nice funeral," Don toasted. They drank. "You ain't answered my question yet," Don reminded.

"I don't care a damn about what happens here, but my job is to git the rest of the Burnt Crick Range for my boss, an' anybody, man or woman, that gits in my way is gonna git hurt," Schiller answered frankly.

"I see. My brother-in-law got in your way, and now his wife's a widow and his kid an orphan. You certainly don't stick at much, do you? There's a couple of dead men up at Dawson's burned cabin. I suggest that you go up there an' take a look at 'em. Then—think twice."

Their eyes clashed. For a moment Schiller's hand hovered over his gun butt. Rick Mays shifted position, but Don knew that he was not

going for his gun until his foreman did. Schiller abruptly placed both hands on the bar. "Fill 'em up, barkeep," he growled.

The tension relaxed. Don was still alert, but he knew that he would have no more trouble in the *Cowhand's Delight*. He didn't take his eyes off Dutch Schiller. Was this the man who had treacherously murdered Dick Carlton? It had been his intention when he came to the country to seek out that man, if possible, and kill him. Schiller had not even denied that he would murder Don in the same cowardly way. He was a gun-fighter, but even with Rick Mays to back him he hadn't wanted a stand-up fight.

"Well, we drunk with yuh," Schiller said. "Now I'm buyin'. An' here's a toast: may you have a quick trip to hell."

Don raised his glass, then deliberately turned the liquor into a spittoon at Schiller's feet.

## *Chapter 20*

DON found a badly worried sister when he reached home. They had expected him the evening before, and Joe Perkin's story had not reassured Fanny at all.

"Where have you been, anyway?" she scolded good-naturedly.

"Well, to tell the truth, I went over the ridge to see how that fellow Dawson was coming along, and I couldn't get back."

"You see," Virla Carlton put in triumphantly, "that was just what Ralph told you. But are you sure, Mr. Fullmer, that it was Dawson you went to see?"

"Perhaps not," he conceded. "In fact I saw quite a few people."

Young Bobby Carlton had climbed upon his lap, and suddenly the youngster took violent hold of his uncle's arm—right over the bullet wound. Don cringed, and hastily loosened the youngster's grasp.

"Hey," he said, "you've been ridin' too many bronks. Ease off, I'm just an old workhorse."

"Don, what's the matter?" Fanny said. "You've been hurt? Your clothes have some holes in them that wasn't there when you left, and I noticed how stiff you walked when you came up the path. And you held your arm strangely too. Have you—have you—"

"Nothing serious, Sis. I have got a couple of bullet scratches. Jud Motley and a gang of his thugs made a raid on the Dawson cabin and tried to murder us in our beds. Fortunately, we were prepared. They burned the cabin and shot up me an' Doc Bland a little, but they got the worst of it."

"How do you know it was Mr. Motley?" Virla asked sharply.

"Well, for one reason," Don grinned, "he had his hands on me, and if I hadn't been able to work a little trick on him I wouldn't be here."

"Nothing is worth getting you killed for," Fanny declared. "Virla is right. I should sell out while I can, before worse happens."

"But I tell you the tide has turned," Don insisted. "Virla seems to have the idee that Motley is a model of virtue. As a matter of fact it turns out that he stole everything he's got from Ad Tolson, the man he sent to the penitentiary. The worst of it was he hounded Tolson's wife to death, and then stole his daughter. And do you know who the daughter has turned out to be?"

"No," Fanny said excitedly.

"Nobody but Fern Dawson—whose real name is Mary Tolson."

"So she's the daughter of an ex-convict?" Virla remarked avidly.

"Right," Don snapped. "I invited her over here, Fanny," he went on. "Tolson has only a one-room cabin, and Jud Motley may try to murder them as he did us, because Matt Dawson has confessed. She wouldn't come, but I'd like her to know that she can come here if it gets too dangerous for her in Eden."

"Why, of course," Fanny said. "I wish she would come."

"Fanny, it seems to me that you owe it to Bobby to keep clear of such people. They can only get you into trouble," Virla argued vehemently. "And I do think you should get away from here while you can."

"As long as I live here, Virla, my door is going to be open to anyone in trouble," Fanny retorted with a show of spirit. "Now, Don, tell us everything."

When he told them about the two men who had been killed, Fanny trembled, but Virla seemed unable to comprehend that such things could happen.

"All this is just more reason why you should get Bobby out of this terrible country at once," the girl declared.

"I do' wanna go," Bobby wailed. "I wanna grow up an' git the man who killed my dad."

"There! you see," Virla cried triumphantly. "That Joe Perkins has been talking to him again."

"I subscribe to his sentiments anyway," Don said.

Presently they saw Ralph Churchill ride up to the corral. Without excusing herself Virla rushed out to talk to him.

"Virla may be right, Don," Fanny said soberly. "You don't know how frightened I am for you."

"Look, Sis: I can't run away now. Even if you sell out I won't go. Motley won't pay you anything for your property. If he stays here he's got to make everybody afraid of him. Frankly, I look for him to give us plenty of trouble." He went on to tell her about his brush with Motley's men when they had been cutting the fence, and of the saddle he had captured.

Another thing he had not mentioned in Virla Carlton's presence was the matter of Vanwormser.

"But that is dreadful," Fanny said. "Why, Vanwormser has always appeared to be so grateful to us. Why, he owes me over twelve hundred dollars right now."

"He's Motley's man all right, and I'll bet my hat that Motley owns his worthless homestead. In fact he may use that to claim he's got a right to take cattle through your range to reach it. But Vanwormser is unimportant. The fellow I'm afraid of is your foreman."

"Ralph! But that's absurd."

"I hate to tell you this, Fanny, and you mustn't let on to Virla or anybody else yet, but the day I came over here I caught Churchill and another man, who I'm sure was Vanwormser, driving your cattle over the mountain, and then they tried to burn a big section of your range. I didn't want to say anything then, but if Motley starts throwin' enough cattle over here to destroy the grass you'd just as well know who you can't trust."

"This *is* awful," Fanny said. "Dick trusted Ralph, and I'd have trusted him with my life. I'll have to get rid of him."

"No; you can't. Not yet. By watchin' Churchill we may git something on Motley. By the way, ain't your sister-in-law gittin' quite a case on friend Ralph—for a person who hates the West and Westerners?"

"I've wondered. I don't think Virla would marry the fellow—at least not now. But she wants amusement, and he does fascinate her. Some times such things grow— It's too bad you didn't come sooner. She might have—"

"Gawd forbid," Don said hastily.

"She's the most beautiful girl in this country, and she has money. You could do worse. You aren't falling for Fern—I mean Mary Tolson by any chance?"

"If I was I'd just be out of luck. She's all for Doc Bland."

"Oh."

"The thing is, Fanny: are you going to make a fight to hold your range, or are you going to quit?"

"I—I—can't quit, Don."

"Good girl! We may git licked, but they'll know they've been through a fight," Don declared.

The next morning found Don and Ralph Churchill in the saddle as soon as the sun was up. Don had told the foreman about his brush with Motley's men. Now they were on their way to inspect the damage and retrieve Harry Tezak's saddle.

Churchill was not talkative. He resented Don's presence, and made no attempt to conceal the fact. The dead horse, now badly bloated, still lay where it had been shot. The fence had not been repaired. The

foreman cursed furiously. He pretended it was because of the fence; Don guessed it was inspired by other causes.

"If they think they can git away with this they're crazy," the man said.

"I don't know," Don ventured to disagree. "This is timbered country. Even if you put a fence rider on the job night and day it would be easy for them to kill him like they did Dick. Anyway, they could cut the fence in a dozen places at one end while he was at the other."

"Yeh? Well, what the hell would you suggest?" Churchill snarled.

"Might make it plain that anybody comin' on this range did so at their own risk."

"Yeh? Three of us against fifteen or twenty of Motley's gunmen. That would be sensible," the foreman said sarcastically.

"Look: what's to prevent Motley from shovin' say two or three thousand cows onto this range, and right on through the nesters below? You know what would happen. Fanny's cattle would be mixed with Motley's and Edwards and the rest would be stripped bare in a week. More cows would drift in here, and it wouldn't take long for Fanny's grass to be gone."

"Well, that's just what I've been tellin' her right along," the foreman said. "It'll happen shore as Gawd made little apples. She'd oughta sell fer what she kin git."

"Maybe. Just the same this fence is lawful property. We can make it tough for anyone caught molestin' it. I got the proof. You know who that saddle belongs to. Why don't you take it to Eden and demand the arrest of this Harry Tezak, Dutch Schiller, and Jud Motley? I'll testify, but you're the foreman."

Churchill started to say something; thought better of it, and said something else. "Mebbe that's a good idee," he conceded. "I wanta make a trip to Eden anyway. I'll just take that rig down there tomorrow. I tell yuh this is a mighty tough job I got—not knowin' what minute a bullet may tear my head off. If my boss wasn't woman I'd quit overnight."

"I'm sure my sister appreciates your loyalty."

They spent considerable time repairing the fence, and then worked back toward the top of the divide. Churchill became more talkative. He discussed Virla Carlton; frankly speculating upon her possibilities, amorous and financial. Don wanted to take a poke at him, but wisely restrained himself. How amazed Virla would be, he thought, if she could have heard her cavalier talk in that particular vein.

As they rode Don sized his companion up carefully. Good-looking, well built, and with a flare for the spectacular, he was the kind to impress women. Even Fanny had believed strongly in the fellow. To a man Churchill seemed conceited and shallow. He was susceptible to flattery, and utterly unreliable in his loyalties.

They were riding along the top of a ridge at a walk when a rifle shot sounded. Don felt himself dropping earthward. He heard the sickening impact of lead meeting bone. His horse, hit squarely above the eyes, had simply dropped. By the scantiest of margins Don avoided getting his foot caught. He was actually standing on the ground with both feet astraddle of his horse. It was an exact duplicate of the scene when he had shot Harry Tezak's horse from under him.

Don didn't take time to look about him. With sure instinct he realized that his only chance to live consisted in getting on behind Churchill before the foreman could get away. There was no protection from the dry gulcher there on that bare ridge, but he knew that the assassin would not take a chance of hitting Churchill.

Two long leaps carried him close to the foreman's horse. A bullet dug up ground at his feet. He made a flying grab for the horn of the saddle, but at just that instant Churchill's mount went into the air with a terrific leap. It came down with a bawl. Don missed the horn by an inch, but despite the horse's pitching he made another dive as the horse came down. That time he caught the fork of the saddle with his finger tips and clung for a moment. Then Churchill's elbow caught him squarely in the chest, and he fell flat on his back.

Churchill was riding like a centaur. He was a real horseman. But his bronc was bucking straight down the side of the ridge and quickly had him out of sight of the sniper—and beyond Don's reach.

Plunk! A bullet bit into the earth a foot from the puncher's hand. He had to be getting out of there. He came to his feet with the speed of an antelope, and bounded down the side of the ridge with as good an imitation of Churchill's bucking bronco as he could muster. Two more shots droned above his head. Didn't touch him.

A hundred yards down the draw the foreman got his horse stopped, and waited for Don.

Churchill took off his hat and pretended to wipe the sweat from his forehead. "By golly, that was close," he said. "Did they nick you?"

"Nary a nick," Don growled out. "Friend Tezak doesn't shoot very well at a movin' target."

"You think it was Tezak?"

"Of course. Coundn't resist gettin' my horse the way I got his."

"Boy, I'm glad this bronc started to pitch, or he'd shore have got me," Churchill said. "Way he tore in he'd have piled me nine times out of ten, but with that sharpshooter over there in the brush he couldn't have throwed me off on that ridge if he'd jumped higher'n the top o' them pine trees."

"Yeh, yuh made a good ride," Don said sardonically.

"Goin' back after yore saddle?" Churchill queried.

Don glanced at him grimly. "Naw," he refused. "It looks like me and Tezak had traded saddles."

## Chapter 21

NOT even his own father had been quite the hero to Bobby that his uncle was. Don could not help being thrilled by such open admiration. He taught the youngster to tie knots, to spin a rope, and at times allowed him to wrap Don's big gun belt twice around his body and practice "fast-draw" with Don's empty six-gun. Bobby's shrill "Bang-bang, you're dead," rang out around the corrals for hours at a time until Virla Carlton put in a protest.

"Do you think that is the proper way to bring up a small boy—to teach him the fastest way to kill people?" she queried with sinister sweetness.

"Well, gosh, ma'am, the gun is empty, and it can't do him any harm to learn the best way to defend himself if he ever has to." Don argued.

"You're just planting bloodthirsty ideas in a susceptible brain," she declared. "When he should be enjoying fairy tales you tell him about Daniel Boone, and Kit Carson."

"Well, ma'am there's been worse citizens than them two. They was shore nuff hard an' tough, but they done a lot toward makin' America, don't yuh think?"

"Oh, stop calling me 'ma'am,'" she burst out. "After all we are relatives—of a sort. My name happens to be Virla."

"Okay, Virla."

"And I'm Bobby's aunt, the same as you are his uncle. Don't you think I should have some say about his training?"

"Aw, gosh, what does a girl know about fightin' Injuns or outlaws," Bobby wailed.

A frown darkened Virla's face, and then she laughed. "I guess I'll have to wait my turn," she said.

Her old hauteur had been quite lacking all through the interview. Indeed, she had become much more friendly toward Don, and she had of late said nothing more about taking Bobby away from his mother. Neither had she ridden around with Ralph Churchill nearly so much, or seemed so friendly with the foreman.

Churchill, for his part, had been unable to conceal his resentment. Quite evidently he blamed Don for his loss of prestige. Then one day a dark, gimlet-eyed individual with a sadistic droop to the corners of his mouth rode into the ranch, and was enthusiastically greeted as "cousin" by Ralph Churchill.

"Want you folks to meet my cousin, Bill Draper," Churchill introduced the man. "He was ridin' through an' stopped off to visit me. I hope you won't mind me keepin' him here a few days, Mrs. Carlton. He'll more than earn his keep."

"Why, of course not," Fanny said hospitably.

Draper proved to be the least talkative man any of them had ever seen; his conversation being confined almost exclusively to "Huh?" and "Uh-huh." Don noticed the man's keen interest in the way he was teaching Bobby to draw. He didn't care how Bobby drew, but his eyes opened with interest whenever Don attempted to show his nephew how it should be done.

"Mebbe I'm doin' it wrong," Don observed once. "Could you show him a better way, Draper?"

"Uuh?" The fellow gave a start. "Uh-uh. Me, I'm no gunman."

A lie if there ever was one, Don thought. Signs of the gunman's trade hung all over the fellow like candles on a Christmas tree.

It was Draper's appearance which did more than anything else to convince Fanny that Churchill was disloyal. The two men bore not the slightest resemblance. She was also convinced that Vanwormser was a traitor to the other ranchers below the Carlton ranch. She had herself gone to see the man, and asked him to sign a mortgage to secure his debt. He had hesitated, hemmed and hawed; finally averring that his place and his livestock were already mortgaged.

A couple of days after that the two ranchers, Edwards and Stapley, whom Don had seen before, came up to the ranch.

"Mrs. Carlton," Edwards said, "we heard that you was gonna make us all mortgage our places to you as security for the money yore husband let us have. If that's so I reckon we'd as well jest turn things over to you or Jud Motley—whichever will give us the most."

"You're quite wrong," Fanny said. "I have your notes. That's all the security I want. If I can hold out you will pay me. If I can't hold Motley off this range your property wouldn't be any good anyway."

"Heck, that ain't the way we heard it," the man said. "We heard you told Vanwormser we'd all have to pay up or give mortgages."

"I told Vanwormser that he'd have to, but that doesn't go for anybody else."

"But why pick on Van?"

"Because I don't believe he owns his place any more," Fanny said. "I hope I'm wrong, but I think he sold out to Jud Motley some time ago."

The two ranchers looked at each other. "Miz Carlton, if he did that we'll tend to him," Edwards declared.

"No, please," Fanny begged. "The fact that he tried to betray his own friends and neighbors will be punishment enough."

The ranchers, however, were still muttering when they left the house.

They came back the next day to report that Vanwormser had picked up bag and baggage and pulled out. A stranger who told them he was working for Jud Motley, was holding down the ranch.

"It means," Edwards said, "that Motley will use that as an excuse to drive his cattle through your drift fences, an' then he'll swamp us

out. Whenever he does that you send word, an' we'll be up here to he'p defend the range. There's a least a dozen of us down there who kin use a gun. We ain't no gunmen like Motley's got, but we'll be fightin' fer our homes."

"I hope it doesn't come to that," Fanny said sadly.

"You can stop it," Virla reminded after the men had gone. "All you have to do is sell out to Mr. Motley. What happens to those men is none of your business."

"You may be right," Fanny conceded. "It isn't the money they owe us I care about, but they've got families—and homes."

Virla sighed. "You're as impractical as Dick was."

"That may be," Fanny said. "Anyway, I'm going to wait until I have to sell. Motley himself may have to surrender if Tolson wins his lawsuit."

It was time, Don decided, to see how the Tolsons were getting along. And, despite his resolve to leave the field free to Dr. Bland, he was powerfully impelled by a need to see Mary again. He was over his wounds now, but he knew it was going to be hard to get away. Fanny was dead set against his going back to Eden alone.

Since Draper's arrival he was nearly always with Churchill, or at least they rode away together. Don, who had implicit confidence in Joe Perkins, had asked that youth to keep an eye on the two, and he had reported that they frequently separated when they were out of sight of the ranch. Joe also reported that there had been no more fence cutting, and very few of Motley's cattle close to the drift fence.

The puncher, however, was far from feeling reassured. He was certain in his own mind that Ralph Churchill was in constant communication with Motley's crew, and that some dirty business impended. He finally announced that he was going to Eden.

"I think," Virla surprised him, "that I will go with you."

He didn't want her to go. He had planned an inspection of Motley's range, but he obviously couldn't take her along there. On the other hand he had no authority to make her stay home, and he couldn't very well ride off and leave her.

He had waited until Churchill and his "cousin" had ridden away before mentioning the trip to town, so he had no fear of being dry-gulched on the way. He had to wait more than an hour, however, for Virla to get ready, and so far as pleasure to the eye was concerned it was well worth the wait.

The girl was a stunning picture in her expensive riding outfit of scarlet silk blouse and olive-green riding breeches. She wore a man's black somebrero, and her small, pointed-toed boots were polished until they fairly shone. She had touched up her cheeks and lips with just enough rouge to be noticeable. And she could really ride.

"You don't like me very well, do you?" Virla asked, after they had ridden for some time.

"Huh?" He colored until his cheeks were redder than hers. "Wh—Why, of course I like you," he said. "Ain't—ain't we relotions—of a sort?"

"You didn't answer my question. As a person you think I'm pretty much of a frost."

"Gee, that's not true," he denied. "You're about the most beautiful thing I ever saw. When I look at you I just kinda dry up."

She laughed. "You still are dodging the question. I suppose it's natural for in-laws to dislike each other, but I like you a lot better than I did when you first came here."

"That goes double," Don said with the utmost sincerity.

"Then we are making progress. We both have Fanny's and Bobby's interest at heart. Don't you think we might work out a compromise?"

"As how?" Don was frankly suspicious. He knew that the girl was adroit.

"Fanny is a born Westerner, and so are you. You both want Bobby brought up in the West. Perhaps it'll be in his blood, too. But if Fanny would sell out here for what she could get she could buy another ranch in some peaceful community. If she needed more money I could let her have it. And you could run the place for her."

Don touched his horse with the spurs, and it double-shuffled ahead of the girl's mount. "Git behind me, Satan," he laughed.

"She may not get away with anything if she tries to hold out here," Virla reminded.

"That's a fact. But she'll at least save a hell of a lot of self-respect," Don retorted.

"I suppose you want to see your friends the very first thing," the girl said. "Would you mind letting me go with you? I'm curious, you know.

"Not at all," he said, though he felt it would have been in better taste, and certainly more agreeable for him if she had put a checkrein on her curiosity.

They were met at the door by Mary.

"Hello, Mary," Don called. "Can we come in?"

"Of course," she smiled. She stood aside for them to enter. "I'm all alone right now, but I'm expecting the doctor back any minute."

"Alone? Where's Dawson?" Don queried.

"He's able to walk on crutches now, so he has taken a room over the *Cowhand's Delight*. Dr. Bland has opened his office again so Dawson goes there to get his leg dressed, and doesn't come here any more." There was decided relief in the girl's tone.

"Then he's made his peace with Jud Motley," Don said. "Some people do have forgivin' natures. Only two weeks since Motley tried to

burn him alive, and yet he goes to Motley's hangout to live. If Doc has reopened his office he must have give up goin' back to the Navy."

"For the time being. He says he is needed here. A lot of people who didn't raise a hand to keep Motley from driving him out are now promising their support."

"Good. Doc's a real man."

Mary had seated them, but she remained standing. She was ill at ease.

"Where's you father?" Don asked.

"He went up to his cabin yesterday to see about selling the cordwood he had cut, and he said he wouldn't be back until tonight," Mary answered.

Virla took a long, lingering look about the room. "Very cozy place you have here," she said with a thin smile.

Mary colored. It was not what had been said, but it was its peculiar timing that made the remark an insult.

"If you'll excuse me," Mary said, "I have some bread in the oven."

She had no sooner left the room than Don said, "Excuse me, Virla, I want a word with Mary, an' I figger the doc will soon be home for his dinner."

"Oh, of course. Perhaps I'd better go."

"No, wait for me. I'll only be a minute." He wanted her to go, and yet he knew it wouldn't look right.

Mary was stooping before the oven when he reached the kitchen. Her face was still flushed. "I—I'd ask you to stay to lunch," she murmured, "only there isn't very much, and you—your friend would think—"

"If she didn't think you were a swell cook she'd be crazy," Don interrupted. "But we're not stayin'. How is the lawsuit coming on?"

"Judge Vane served papers on Motley, but he denies that we have any claim on the Silver Chief. It seems that after Father was sent away Motley appealed from the decision of the courts. When it came time for the final hearing there was no one to represent Father so the appeal was granted, and Motley got his judgment by default. Judge Vane says it's anything but a clear title, and he is sure we can get judgment in time, but it may take years because Motley is sure to appeal to the Supreme Court," Mary explained.

"And in the meantime we've got nothing on Motley, and you folks have nothing to live on."

"My father can make a living for us," Mary said proudly. "In the meantime the doctor is paying me wages for keeping house for him."

"Well, Mary, we'll be going now. Doc might arrive an' insist on us staying for dinner. Us men never have sense enough to find out whether a woman has plenty of grub on hand."

"You seem to have," she smiled, and followed him back to the front

room. She inquired how Fanny and Bobby were, and Don told her they were fine.

"Well, Mary," he said, "keep you chin up. I'll be seeing you before I leave town."

"I wonder how it feels to have to transfer from one father to another so swiftly," Virla murmured. "At least she certainly has bettered her material condition."

Don did not deign to reply.

## *Chapter* 22

DON took Virla to a restaurant for lunch. "I've got to see Tolson," he told her, "and he won't be back till night. That means I'll have to stay all night here, so you'd best do your shoppin' right away so you'll git home before dark. Tell Fanny I'll be all right."

He was glad to get away from her so easily. He had taken their horses to the livery stable for feed, and he promised to have her animal tied at the hitch-rack in just an hour. He watched her go into a store, and then he headed for Dr. Bland's office to wait. He was sorely tempted to invade the *Cowhand's Delight* once more, but that would be crowding his luck too hard. Bland had gone home to lunch, and he hadn't yet returned when Don had to get Virla's horse.

The girl was nowhere in sight. He waited a few minutes, then tied the horse in plain sight and returned to the doctor's waiting room. Bland's office was over the drugstore, and directly across the street from the Paradise Hotel, a name as inapt as that of Eden itself. It happened that by looking out of the window he could see into a front room on the second floor of the hotel, a room which had attorney Thomas Hinkle's name frosted upon the glass. He was looking that way quite casually when he caught a glimpse of a scarlet blouse. He instantly pricked up his ears. A moment later he knew for a certainty that Virla was over there in conversation with Motley's slimy lawyer. It apparently was an animated conversation, for once he saw Hinkle's face, and it was wreathed in a smug, complacent smile.

Ten minutes later Virla descended to the street. Don could see that she looked well pleased with herself. She gazed around for a minute, apparently in search of him; then crossed the street to her horse and rode out of town. Don heaved a relieved sigh, but he was still perplexed and worried by what he had just seen. In fact he was half tempted to go over to Hinkle's office and demand an explanation, when Dr. Bland came in.

"Don!" the doctor greeted heartily. "Mary told me you were in town. Glad to see you. Why didn't you stay and have lunch with us? Didn't Mary invite you?"

"Oh, yes, but we thought we hadn't better."

"Just saw Miss Carlton leaving town. Must be you're staying over. If so you could have supper with us. Got an extra bed, too."

It sounded almost as though the doctor and Mary were married, Don thought jealously.

"As a matter of fact I'm leavin' town myself right away," Don said. "I told Virla I was staying over because I want to go home by way of Wolf Creek, an' naturally I didn't want her with me. I wanted to see Ad Tolson, but I may meet him on the way."

"Better do that in the morning," Bland urged. "Come on into the office, and if any patients arrive you just groan real loud once in a while to make 'em think I'm busy. Got a lot to talk to you about."

Don followed the doctor into the inner office, and they sat down. "So Dawson has gone back to Motley?" Don remarked.

"Yes. They got at him. That confession of his is still up there where you and Mary hid it, but it wouldn't be much good to anybody so long as Dawson is alive to deny it. In fact Motley seems to be as strong as ever. I've been afraid every day that he and Tolson would clash, but neither one of 'em is on the street very much. Judge Vane has been down to the county seat trying to get Coates dismissed as deputy, but apparently the fellow made his story stick that he was trying to make an arrest, for he still wears his badge. He's just getting around again now."

"Wonder if he'll try to arrest me for shootin' Dawson now that the cuss has gone back to 'em?"

"Not likely. They don't want the business to go to court, and we haven't got evidence enough to convict them, so it's about a draw. What I'm worried about is Motley resorting to his old weapons. I didn't like the idea of Tolson going up there by himself yesterday. Of course there is that confession of Alf Hinkle's in the warden's office, but I'd hate to risk my life on that. And I'm afraid that while you're here in Eden you're in more—"

"Doc! Look!" Don exclaimed. "Down the street. It's Ad Tolson—and he's hurt."

Don had just happened to catch sigh of the big woodchopper as he glanced out of the window, and he knew instantly that something was wrong. Tolson was in the middle of the road. He staggered like a drunken man. Even as Bland leaped to the window they saw the big man go to his knees. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Don saw the Eel just disappearing through the door of the *Cowhand's Delight*.

The puncher sprang to his feet. "Come on," he cried.

As they raced through the waiting room they all but collided with a couple of prospective patients.

"Doctor, wait!" one of them wailed.

"Gotta go," Bland replied. "Make selves to home." He was just

three stair-steps behind when Don reached the street. And Don had no more than touched the sidewalk when a bullet buzzed spitefully past his head and crashed through the plate-glass window of the drug-store.

Instinctively, Don glanced toward Tom Hinkle's office across the street, and he was just in time to see a hand holding a gun being jerked inside the open window. Infuriated by the uncalled-for attempt at murder Don jerked his six-gun from the holster and sent a slug through the open window.

A moment later the free-swinging doors of the saloon burst open. Half a dozen men led by Jud Motley debauched onto the sidewalk.

"Get back into my office," Bland ordered. "There'll be hell to pay if you don't. I'm unarmed, and I'm a doctor. They can't stop me."

Don paid no attention. He ran on toward Tolson, who had somehow managed to get to his feet again, and was staggering down the street. Immediately Motley and his men charged into the street to get between Don and the doctor, and the wounded man. With Motley was Bruce Coats, Johnny Eglison, Tug Hopkins, Ed Spool, the Eeel, and Crip Bloom; an unsavory but formidable lot.

"Hold on there," Jud Motley shouted. "That feller can't flout the law of Eden no longer. Arrest him, Bruce."

"Arrest an' be damned," Don barked. He brought up his gun. Covered Motley. "Pull in yore horns, Motley, or I'll do the fanciest job of dehornin' this burg ever saw."

Motley stopped. His gun was in his hand, and yet he had been stalemated. With Don Fullmer, he had learned, action counted more than talk. One man there, however, had had no experience with the quick-shooting puncher. That was Johnny Eglison, the town marshal.

Don took a desperate chance then. The moment he took his gun off Jud Motley the fight might become general, and Eden would see its bloodiest battle. But it had to be risked. He shifted his aim just as Eglison's gun came up. Fired. He had risked everything on a trick shot. He surprised even himself when he saw the marshal's gun fly out of his hand. Without waiting for the weapon to strike the ground he had Motley covered again. Had he shot Eglison the man would have pressed the trigger whether he hit anything or not, and Motley and the others would have taken a chance. Now they were awed by what seemed the uncanny marksmanship of the man confronting them.

Meanwhile, Tolson had fallen again. Dr. Bland walked straight to him, ignoring the hostile brigade in his path as though they had not been there.

"You lose, Motley," Don drawled. "Any of you start anything else, and I'll let you have it—right in the belly. Git back on the sidewalk an' stay there."

The men started to back away, but Don ordered Tug Hopkins and

the bartender to stop. "You're both husky," he said, "help Doc carry Ad Tolson off the street."

Reluctantly the two men stepped to Tolson's side, and under the doctor's direction assisted the woodchopper to his feet. Each one got under a shoulder and thus sustained most of the injured man's weight.

"Take him to my house, not the office," Bland ordered.

Motley and the others had retreated to the sidewalk, but when Don started to back away Motley deliberately turned and walked into the saloon. Don made no effort to stop him. The puncher was well aware that he had been lucky; that death had passed him by the width of an eye-winker. He was not going to crowd his luck. He hastily jointed the doctor.

Mary saw them and came running. Her dark eyes looked tragic against the pallor of her face.

"What is it? What's happened?" she cried. "I heard a shot."

"Your father's been hurt, Mary," the doctor said. "I don't know how bad. You run back and fix the bed. Get some hot water ready."

The girl hesitated only a moment, then ran back to do the doctor's bidding.

The two unwilling helpers took themselves away as soon as they had placed the injured man on a bed. Dr. Bland hastily cut Tolson's blood-soaked shirt from him and located the wound. A bullet had entered the man's back under the shoulder and torn its way out under the collarbone in front.

"My God, from the bleeding he must have been walking for hours," Bland said in awe. "I don't see how he could do it."

"Had to git home," the wounded man said weakly. His eyes rested fondly upon his daughter. Mary raised questioning eyes to the doctor's face.

"He'll be all right, Mary," Bland said. "I never saw such a physique. With a constitution like his he can't help getting well. But he needs a blood transfusion."

"Well, looks like I'm elected again," Don remarked.

"No; can't let you do it. You've lost too much blood yourself lately, and it looks like you might need all you've got. That outfit will be after your scalp."

"I'm here," Mary said.

"And you'll have to serve," the doctor said. "It won't hurt."

"I know," she said steadily. "I wouldn't mind if it did."

They saw that Tolson was trying to talk. "Better lie quiet, old man, until you get stronger," Bland said cheerfully.

"Things I —gotta say," Tolson insisted. "Above Dawson's place—big herd—cattle. Motley's men been havin'—big roundup. Means—goin' to shove big herd—over divide. Carlton's range.

"So that's what they've been up to!" Don exclaimed. "Going to

overrun us in one big drive. Holy Smokes! If that ain't stopped Motley will ruin everybody on Burnt Creek."

"I heard cows bawlin'," Tolson struggled on. "Went to see what was —matter. Guess had—scouts out. Started home when shot hit me—in back. Couldn't move. Two men came. Looked me over. Left me —for dead. After while—got up. Started home. Wanted to see Mary —again. Wanted—send word—Carlton's—"

"You've talked enough, Ad," Dr. Bland interrupted. "You've done what no other man I ever saw could do. But now you've got to lie quiet."

"Is there anything else I can do?" Don asked.

"No. I can take care of Tolson all right now. I'll get another woman to help with the work."

"I wish you had a man, too, to stand guard," Don said.

"I don't think they'll dare to bother anybody here," the doctor replied. "What are you going to do about this other business? It sounds mighty serious to me, and you know Dutch Schiller has got a big crew of men, and they can't be bluffed like these saloon bums here."

"I know. But if they can be stopped I'm going to stop 'em."

Mary came close and unconsciously placed her hand upon the puncher's arm. "Please be careful, Don," she begged. "You've done so much for us that I—that I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you."

There was a tenderness in her eyes which made Don want to take her in his arms. "I'll be all right, Mary," he assured her. "You take care of yourself. Trust Doc. He's a darn good man."

Suddenly her arms went around his neck, and she drew his face down and kissed him. It was then that Don had to fight his hardest battle. The longing to embrace her which he had felt before was nothing compared to this. Yet all he could do was return her kiss chastely, and get out of the house as quickly as possible.

It wasn't until he was outside that he remembered that his horse was at the livery stable, and to reach it he would have to run the gauntlet of his enemies in the *Cowhand's Delight*. And he would have to come back the same way. Yet he couldn't leave town without his horse. He knew that Dr. Bland would have suggested that he try to get the horse if he had thought of it, but the doctor was busy, and Don wasn't going to have the doctor taking his risks anyway.

He was nearly to the drugstore when he saw Judge Vane. The thin, white-haired lawyer saw him at the same moment and waited for him.

"Some trouble here a little while ago, I believe," the judge said.

"A little," Don replied. Somebody tried to kill Ad Tolson. When Doc and I went to help him Motley tried to stop us."

"So they've tried to murder my client, eh?" the judge said angrily. "How badly is he hurt?"

"Doc says he'll live, although they left him for dead."

"I was afraid of something of the kind."

"What about that Hinkle confession in the warden's office? Ad thought it would protect him. Wouldn't it be a good idea to have the warden open it?"

"It might at that. An assault has been made on Tolson. It would be *prima facie* proof of the charges he made in that sealed letter. But perhaps I'd better wait until Tolson is able to talk it over. If he dies of course I'll wire the warden immediately."

"By the way, Judge: I'm not popular here myself. Somebody took a shot at me from Tom Hinkle's office a little while ago and busted that window. I've got to get my horse from the livery stable. If you don't think it would be too dangerous for you I'd like mighty well to have your company," Don suggested.

The judge gave a snort. "Of course I'll accompany you, young man. I can assure you that you'll be safe while you're with me."

Don was not so sure, but at least it was the best insurance he could get. They walked down the street unmolested, got Don's horse, and walked back up the middle of the street together, Don leading the animal behind. They didn't so much as see even the Eel, who must have been doing his spying from under cover.

Well past the *Cowhand's Delight* Don swung aboard his horse. "Thanks, Judge," he smiled. "Maybe I can do the same for you some day." He galloped out of town.

## *Chapter 23*

ALTHOUGH he had not appeared on the street Jud Motley was well informed as to how and when Don Fullmer left Eden. "He's gone, boss," Crip Bloom reported timidly. "Gone by the Burnt Creek road."

"Yah!" Motley snarled, "we let him ride out of here like he owned the town. I've had nothing but trouble since that feller hit this country."

"I tried to arrest him, Jud," Bruce Coates said. "If I hadn't been afraid he'd shoot you—"

"You'll never see the day you'll have guts enough to put that bird under arrest," Motley stormed. "Damn him, he's got a charmed life. Harry Tezak had a chance to git him, but he had to show off an' shoot his horse from under him first. Eglison could have killed him if he'd been faster. Always the cuss manages to git the breaks."

"He made his own break when he shot that gun out of my hand," the marshal said ruefully.

"I wouldn't mind him so bad, if his luck didn't seem to spread to

the others," Motley rasped. "What the hell! Dutch Schiller sends a man to report that Rick Mays has got rid of Tolson, an' he no more than got away when here comes Tolson draggin' himself in."

"He looked purty sick, boss," Ed Spool stated. "T'ain't likely he'll pull through."

"He got here, didn't he?" Motley snarled. "And he musta told Fullmer about that herd of cattle. After I go to the trouble of keepin' a watch on him every day to see that he don't ride over the divide and find out, he drifts in here in broad daylight, over a well-traveled road, and finds out what we've been doin' without turnin' a hand."

Attorney Tom Hinkle had slipped in through a side door and joined the group. Everyone in the saloon who wasn't a Motley retainer had long since taken a definite hint that their presence was not desired.

"Before you do anything violent, Jud," the lawyer said soothingly, "you'd better give me another chance to buy out Mrs. Carlton. I talked to the Carlton girl again today, and gave her a bundle of good arguments why her sister-in-law should sell. She told me she thought she could swing it if you'd raise the ante five thousand. She said she was working on a new angle that is a honey. She's a swell-looking dame, and insead of antagonizing this Fullmer fellow she plans to string him along. If he falls for her, and he will, she can get him to advise his sister to sell. That's all it'll take. Fullmer will fall for that girl's line, and her quarter of a million dollars, like a hungry tramp breaking into a pantry. I told the girl you'd give twenty thousand instead of fifteen."

"That might have been all right if Tolson hadn't stumbled onto them cattle," Motley said. "We can't wait now. Besides, I ain't in no mood to pay twenty thousand dollars fer what I can git fer the takin'."

"But I tell you, Jud, it'll pay to wait," Hinkle argued desperately. "This scheme of mine and the Carlton girl's can't miss. You'll be takin' a terrible chance if you try taking the range by force. The minute you do that it'll tend to show that you're afraid of the case Tolson and that girl have against you."

"You say I'll lose that anyway, and you're a lawyer," Motley retorted.

"I know. But they may get quicker action against you. Besides, this shooting of Tolson will complicate matters. If he dies the girl will claim you hired his murderer."

"What of it? We've got your brother's confession back."

"They've still got Dawson's confession."

"And we've got Dawson. Him an' Alf will both deny everything."

"Well, I can't stop you," Hinkle sighed.

"You bet you can't," Motley said loudly. "I've allus got what I wanted by takin' it, an' to hell with the law. I've got them cattle all

gathered to shove through the Carlton drift fence, an' by Gawd I mean to shove 'em. Tug, ride up to Wolf Crick, an' tell Dutch Schiller to start pushin' 'em over the divide at daybreak. Tell him I'll be along right after sunup."

Tom Hinkle mopped his brow with a huge linen handkerchief and started to leave the saloon. His eyes dwelt upon a sodden figure asleep across one of the card tables in the corner. The man was Alf Hinkle, his brother; a man sunken to the lowest depths of alcoholism. For a moment the lawyer turned his steps in that direction, then changed his mind and went out the way he had come.

Jud Motley retired to his private room in the back. He jerked his thumb for the Eel to follow him.

"Yes, boss?" the little crook queried eagerly.

"Ginerally yo're the most dependable man I got, except for Dutch Schiller," Motley said. "You messed things up at Dawson's cabin the other night, but I'm givin' you a chance to redeem yoreself."

"Gimme anything I kin do, an' I'll do it," the Eel asserted.

"This job'll be easy. You know that Ad Tolson got a holt of Alf Hinkle an' made him sign a confession one time. We've got that back, an' a statement from him that he had to swear to some lies to Tolson to save his life. But if he confessed once he might do it again, see?"

"It'll be easy, boss," the Eel grinned. "But what about Matt Dawson? He confessed once, too."

"I know. But he won't do it again. Matt hates that whole outfit as bad as I do."

"All right, I'll tend to Alf. An' kin I go with you tomorrow? I never was a cowpuncher, but I like to see cattle bein' worked."

"Sure, you can go," Motley said magnanimously. Neither of them dreamed that he was giving the Eel permission to ride to his death.

## *Chapter 24*

DON FULLMER was able to guess pretty accurately at what Jud Motley would do. Afraid that Tolson would reveal his secret roundup of cattle he would likely try to drive across the divide and smash the Burnt Creek outfits before they could rally to defend themselves. Don knew that he and Joe Perkins could do little alone. Churchill and his alleged cousin would surely show their true colors if a conflict came. The ranchers below the F D outfit would be the principal sufferers. If help was to be obtained it must come from them.

It was almost dark when Don reached the first ranch. A farming section below precluded Motley driving cattle up Burnt Creek, and the mountain range dividing Burnt Creek and Wolf Creek presented an insurmountable barrier except for that portion shut off by Dick Carlton's

drift fences. It was this geographical fact which made it necessary for Motley to cross the Carlton range before he could overrun the others, and bring his holdings into a solid block on both sides of the mountain. Don knew the ranchers were alive to the fact, and he anticipated no difficulty in convincing them of the gravity of the situation.

He was surprised, therefore, when the first man he encountered was diffident about offering aid.

"It's Mrs. Carlton's fence they'll have to cut," the man said. "Looks like it was up to her to defend it."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it the quicker we let Motley's cows git onto yore range the better." Don said hotly.

He was about to ride away when the man began to apologize. "Mebbe," the fellow suggested, "we oughta go see Enos Edwards an' Jack Stapley, an' see what they think."

It was a good idea. Don waited impatiently while the man—his name was Marv Cassutt—got his horse. They went to Stapley's first. The rancher refused comment, but plainly recognized the gravity of the situation. He merely suggested that they next visit Enos Edwards.

Edwards was a man whom Don had been inclined to like from the very first. He was slow in his movements, and deliberate in his thought; yet having come to a decision he would, so Don thought, be hard to swerve.

"I been expectin' something of the sort," he said when Don had finished. "There's just this much about it. Once them cows of Motley's hit the Carlton range in big numbers nothin' kin hold 'em back. In three weeks there won't be enough grass on this side the mountain to feed a hummin' bird. We gotta stop 'em or quit."

"But how we gonna stop all them gun-fighters o' Motley's?" the man Cassutt queried weakly.

"With guns," Edwards retorted grimly.

"I've been thinkin'," Don said slowly. "Guns will help, an' we've got to have 'em. But if we git up there in time to stampede that herd down the other side it would take Motley another two weeks to gather 'em again, and by that time we could be ready for him."

"You got any idees?" Edwards asked.

"Well, yes. But they may be hard to work out. What I'm worried about most is those fellows up at the ranch, Churchill and Draper. There's things we'll need to git from there, an' those two birds will certainly carry the news to Motley."

That was a matter which the ranchers were plainly willing to leave up to him. But there was much to do. The other ranchers had to be notified; they would all have to make arrangements for their absence from home. Don suggested that they have a meeting, and arrive at the Carlton ranch in a body not later than daybreak. There was nothing that he could tell them that Edwards and Stapley couldn't, so he

rode on home. But when he reached the ranch the lights were out. Everybody had gone to bed.

Don lighted the lamp in the front room, and knock on his sister's door.

"Who is it?" Fanny called.

"Don. Slip on something an' come out. Want to talk to you."

She quickly joined him, her face full of grave concern. "Don, has anything happened. You haven't—"

"Been getting into any more trouble? No more than the usual amount. But something has happened, and I don't want anybody else to hear." Then, in low tones, he told her all that had occurred.

"But I can't understand it," Fanny said. "Virla had a talk with Attorney Hinkle, and he said Motley would raise his offer to us, and do right by the other ranchers. If he is willing to buy why should he want to invade our range?"

Don was expounding his views as to why Motley would not wait when the inner door opened and Virla stood there in a rich dressing gown and slippers. Her beautiful golden hair hung loosely over her shoulders.

"I thought I heard voices," she said. "Is anything the matter? I thought you said you wouldn't be home tonight, Don?"

Somewhat wearily Don repeated his story.

"But Attorney Hinkle told me they would do nothing until we had a chance to talk this offer over," Virla said.

"That was before he knew Tolson had been shot," Don said grimly. "Now that they've been discovered they can't afford to wait. That herd will be movin' in on us like a horde of Mormon crickets before noon tomorrow."

"I can't believe it, but even so, what can you do about it?" the girl demanded.

"I don't quite know, but we can do our damnedest to try to stop 'em," Don confidently asserted. "What I'm afraid of is that these two traitors here will get wise and give Motley a warning. You may not know it, Virla, but I've known ever since I've been here that Churchill is in Motley's employ."

"Aren't you afraid you have too much imagination?" the girl taunted.

"Not about that. The lower ranchers will be up here first thing in the morning, and I mean to see to it that neither Churchill nor Draper gets a chance to leave. If we can get to the top of the pass before the cattle reach the drift fence we can hold 'em back."

"You mean to say that you would fight a bloody battle just to save a little grass for cows?" the girl asked incredulously.

"The first part is right. I think there are other things than the welfare of cows at stake," he said coldly.

"If you are beaten, then what? Suppose they come down here and

attack the ranch. Suppose Fanny and Bobby are killed?" the girl cried with rising hysteria.

"We'll see that they don't."

"Fanny," the girl cried, "this is your ranch. You're the boss here, not him. You've got no right to let him do this. I tell you you've got to think of Bobby. Let me go to Eden right now and tell Mr. Motley we'll take his offer."

Fanny was plainly undecided; wracked between the possibility of disaster for those she loved, and the thought of breaking her dead husband's promises to his neighbors.

"It's out of Fanny's hands now," Don told her. "In the first place Motley wouldn't back up anything Hinkle said. In the second place it's me and the ranchers below who are going to stop Motley—and none of us are working for Fanny."

"You—you are just a bloodthirsty—er—er—cannibal!" Virla cried out. With a dramatic wave of her arms she left the room.

"I'm so afraid she's right," Fanny murmured.

"About me bein' a cannibal? Who have I ever eat?"

"You know what I mean. After all she is disinterested, and is thinking solely of Bobby's welfare. That is all I should think about."

"I'm not so sure," Don argued. "She's more interested in gettin' her own way than anything."

"And now you're getting childish, too," Fanny smiled faintly.

"Damned if I ain't," he grinned ruefully.

He kissed her lightly upon the cheek and went to bed.

As soon as it was light enough to see, Don was up and outside. He started to drive in the horses, but when he entered the stable there was no horse there. There had been two when he went to bed; his own, and a night horse Churchill had tied up. It was still dark inside the stable. Hurriedly he struck a match, and inspected the harness room. Neither Churchill's nor Draper's saddle was there.

The men were gone! Don hurried to the bunkhouse and woke up Joe Perkins. "Joe, do you know when those other fellows left here?" he demanded.

The puncher sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Gone?" he questioned. "They gone?" He looked over at the empty bunks and blinked again. "Well, I'm a son of a tar-heel if they ain't."

"Think hard, Joe. Didn't you hear anything in the night?"

"Come to think of it, I did. I half woke up once, an' Ralph was over there by the winder talkin' to somebody. I jest supposed it was his cousin he was talkin' to an' went back to sleep. Does seem funny now that I think of it, that they'd be up there talkin' after they went to bed. I think Ralph was in his underclothes."

There was not much to be gained there. The puncher was evidently a sound sleeper. Don went around outside the indicated window and

stared at the ground. There, faintly, but unmistakably were the prints of small, dainty house slippers.

"That damned girl," Don breathed furiously. There was no question about it. Virla had warned Chuchill of the proposed attempt to stop the raid, and he and his blessed cousin had gone to warn Motley.

## *Chapter* 25

FOR a moment Don knew a wild desire to administer physical chastisement to the self-willed girl whose action bade fair to wreck all his plans. It was no use, of course. She could not be made to realize that her action might cost the lives of several good men. Regardless of her warning Don stubbornly resolved to go ahead.

He sent Joe Perkins out after the horses, while he hastily greased the wheels of an old wagon with a wood-rack on it. He had Joe help him run it up to a haystack, and while Joe harnessed a team Don piled as much dry hay on the wagon as the narrow rack would hold.

"I noticed an old wood road leading up to the Wolf Creek Pass," Don told the youngster. "Do you suppose you can get this wagon up there?"

"Well, it ain't been used for several years, but I reckon I can do it," Joe answered.

"You do that. Git it up there some way if you have to carry it," Don said, as he lashed the hay on with a lasso rope.

Just then Fanny called to them that breakfast was ready. "Where are the other boys?" she asked.

"Gone," Don told her grimly. "Sweet little Virla took it on herself to wake 'em up an' tell 'em what we were up to. No doubt they're havin' breakfast with Dutch Schiller right now, an' plannin' the best way to wipe us out."

"Oh, Don, you'd better give it up," Fanny said.

"Not by a damn' sight. I won't give your precious sister-in-law that much satisfaction."

The two punchers swallowed their breakfasts hastily and prepared to leave. "Tell Edwards to hustle as fast as he can," he directed Fanny. "And you'd better take Bobby an' hike to the brush," he added soberly. "If we do git the worst of it, and they come here—I—wouldn't want—"

"We'll be all right," Fanny said, with a choke in her voice. "Don't fight them, Don. If you can stop their cattle, all right. But don't do any shooting."

"We won't unless we have to," Don told her.

As soon as Joe got under way with the wagon Don mounted Blackie and went on ahead.

The wagon was hardly out of sight before Virla appeared in the

dining room. "Everybody gone?" she asked with pretended amazement.

"Everybody but us," Fanny said crisply. "Two of them seem to have pulled out in the night."

"You mean Ralph and Draper?"

Fanny looked her straight in the eye. "Don says you warned them."

Virla flushed. "I did," she confessed after a moment. "I had to get word to Motley's outfit someway. I told Ralph to tell them not to make a drive because I was sure I could persuade you to settle the matter without bloodshed."

"Well, perhaps you're right," Fanny assented. "Anything is better than this awful fear of somebody else getting killed like—like Dick was."

It was after sunup when the ranchers from below arrived. There were fourteen men and boys in the party. All were armed, and yet they didn't appear to be a very formidable fighting force. Fanny went out to meet them; told them that Don and Joe had gone on ahead. Then she had to tell them that Churchill had gone away in the night to warn Motley's men.

"You mean, he was a traitor?" Edwards queried.

"That seems to be about it," Fanny said faintly. "We seem to be beaten. I think we had better see Jud Motley and make the best terms we can. I can assure you of one thing. I won't accept any better terms than he gives the rest of you."

"The minute we let him know we can't stop his cows from swarmin' our range we're done," Edwards said. "We won't any of us git a cent out of him."

"Then, if you're going on anyway, I'm going with you," Fanny declared. "Maybe if I talk to Motley himself we can avoid bloodshed."

Despite protests from the men and from Virla she changed rapidly into her riding costume. It was one she had worn very little since the death of her hubsand. Virla wanted to go along, or to go instead, but Fanny wouldn't listen.

"You stay here and take care of Bobby," she told the girl. "Better keep your ponies saddled, and if you see any strange men coming get to the timber as quickly as you can."

"I'll look after Bobby," Virla promised.

It was nearly noon when the girl saw two horsemen riding in from the range at a lope. She had given Bobby his breakfast, made a not too successful effort to explain why everyone else on the place had gone, and finally sent him out to the corral to practice roping fence posts while she tried to read.

She was tremendously relieved when she recognized the approaching horsemen as Churchill and his taciturn cousin. She met them at the corral. Her heart sank as she saw the assumed gravity of their faces.

"What has happened?" she burst out anxiously. "Did you come from the divide?"

"Yeh, we did," Churchill answered. "Hell is poppin' up there. We delivered yore message to Dutch Schiller, but he wouldn't pay no attention. Sent one part of his men over here to waylay Fullmer's men, an' had the others hustle up the cattle.

"We got away as soon as we could. We missed Fullmer somehow, but finally run into Mrs. Carlton. By that time Fullmer had been killed an' the rest o' them nesters about wiped out. Motley's men are runnnin' hog wild, swearin' they'll burn every house and murder every man, woman and child on Burnt Crick."

"Oh! Oh!" Virla moaned. Her brain whirled. She thought she would faint.

"It was all we could do to save Mrs. Carlton," Churchill went on, "but we did it. She is hurt a little, though—not bad, but enough that she couldn't come with us."

"Oh, she never should have gone up there," Virla wailed.

"I'll say she shouldn't, but it can't be helped now. The thing to do is git you an' Bob away from here before those crazy men of Motley's git here. We'll pick up Mrs. Carlton on the way, an' take you all to a safe place that I know of where you can hide till this is all over."

"Thank God you are here, Ralph," the girl said earnestly. "But shouldn't we go the other way? Somebody ought to warn these people below."

"We can't do it, Virla. We might run into more of Motley's men comin' the other way. I reckon some of these nesters must have got away, an' they'll warn their families. You must hustle. Throw some o' yore things an' Bobby's into a sack or something, while we rustle some grub and beddin'. There's no time to lose," Churchill commanded.

Virla grabbed Bobby and flew back to the house. She frantically grabbed up a few necessities, refusing steadfastly to be diverted by the boy's questions. When she finished the two men were packing two extra horses that had been in the corral.

"Come on, younger, climb onto that pony," Churchill ordered impatiently as Bobby hung back.

"I do' wanna go," Bobby wailed. "I want my mother an' Uncle Don."

"We're going to Mother, dear," Virla urged.

Still the boy cried and hung back. Impatiently Ralph Churchill picked him up by the collar of the coat and the seat of the pants and flung him into the saddle. "Come on now, an' no more damn' whimperin," the foreman growled angrily.

They rode as fast as they could make the pack horses travel until they were well out of sight of the ranch. Bill Draper was as taciturn as ever, but Churchill volubly disclaimed any disloyalty to the outfit.

"Them's just lies that Don Fullmer told, because he wanted to take charge," he declared.

They crossed Burnt Creek, and were soon in a high, rough country well above the Carlton range. With growing uneasiness Virla observed that the men never slackened pace. Bobby still cried softly.

"Where are we going to meet Fanny?" she asked at last. "I thought you said—"

"Don't worry about her. She knows this country like a book. She said she'd ride on. We may overtake her any time, but if we don't there's nothin' to worry about. She knows right where we're goin'."

It wasn't like Fanny to go on ahead if she had sent for Bobby. She would be far more likely to come and meet them.

"Look here," she said, "there is something wrong. I'm sure that Fanny isn't ahead of us. I'm going back."

"Oh, no, you're not," Churchill said curtly. "You're going on."

"Is this a kidnapping?" she asked sharply. She noticed that Bill Draper had dropped into the trail behind them.

"I wouldn't call it that," Churchill drawled. "We're just takin' you an' the kid where yuh'll be safe. You know I've been plumb stuck on you ever since you lit in this country. I'd like to marry yuh. O' course, if yuh can't see it that way we may like a little pay for our trouble—"

"How much pay?" Virla snapped. "And please don't insult me again by mentioning marriage."

"Just as you say," Churchill shrugged. "What about fifty thousand dollars. You'd be willin' to raise that much, I reckon, to git back to yore folks. We won't ask nothin' fer the kid; figger Jud Motley will pay us a little for him."

Virla's heart had gone cold inside her bosom, but for Bobby's sake she dared not let on how frightened she was. The boy had at last ceased his whimpering. He was paying strict attention.

"Why, that's absurd," she said. "I haven't that much money, and I couldn't collect any unless you let me go free to do it."

"If yuh can't, lady, then that's just yore hard luck," Bill Draper spoke up.

"An' another thing," Churchill horned in, "yuh'd better tell the kid to behave himself, an' not git any fool notions 'bout gittin' away. We don't need him much anyway. In fact it might be more convenient without him."

The girl was physically ill from shock and anxiety. White of face, and with trembling lips she turned to Bobby. "Stay close to me, darling. Don't leave me, even for a minute."

Shadows were falling deeply across the canyon when the men at last drew rein. Long since, Virla had lost all idea as to where they might be.

"Should be about here," Churchill muttered. While Draper stayed

with the prisoners the foreman conducted a search through the aspens for some ten minutes, then announced that he had found what he was looking for—a small, musty cabin with half-rotted logs and a dirt floor.

"Not so very sumptuous, but you'll have to make the best of it," Churchill laughed. "We're hidin' out the horses, so yuh wanta remember it's an awful long walk."

"An' if we happen to ketch yuh tryin' to git away the kid won't come back," Bill Draper said in a voice which terrorized the girl to the marrow of her bones.

"Just one thing I want to ask," she got out. "You said that Don Fullmer was dead, and Fanny herself injured. That wasn't true, was it?"

"I don't know about Mrs. Carlton, but if Fullmer tried to pull what you said he was goin' to, he just ain't with us no more," Churchill laughed.

Virla retreated into the musty old prospector's cabin, which had not been used for a score of years, and drew her nephew to her.

"Don't you worry, Virla," Bobby said bravely. "We'll slip away an' git our ponies when they're asleep. Muggins knows his way home."

The boy was tired. Soon after they had eaten supper he was asleep on the bed of boughs which Churchill had made for them in the back of the old cabin. The two men sat by a fire out in front. As soon as the boy's deep breathing told her he was asleep Virla went out to the two men.

"If I've got to pay you money for our release the sooner we get it over with the better," she said crisply. "You seem to have an erroneous idea of my fortune, but I perhaps can raise a few thousand by writing a letter to my lawyer."

"We'll do the writin'," Draper said. "But there's no hurry."

The girl looked bewildered.

"Yuh see," Churchill explained, "as long as yo're missin' Jud Motley will be blamed. It won't look well for a man of his standin'. We figger he'll pay plenty fer us to let yuh come back an' tell the truth who took yuh. The longer we wait the hotter it'll git fer him, see? But if you hadn't kinda cold-shouldered me after that damn' Fullmer arrived this mebbe wouldn't have happened. There may still be time—"

Hopelessly, and with a blind hatred for everything connected with the West, the girl turned and rushed back into the cabin.

## *Chapter* 26

DON was not long getting within sight of the padlocked gate where he had first set foot on his sister's range. He was sure that either here or half a mile north, where the fence had been cut that first day

(by, as he was now convinced, Ralph Churchill and Vanwormser), would be where Dutch Schiller would point his drive.

Being thoroughly convinced that Motley's crew had already been warned, he was not foolish enough to ride boldly up to the gate. He could see no one around, yet the gate stood ajar. He retreated a little way, and left Blackie in a thicket. Then, with his carbine under his arm he climbed toward the other gap, keeping to cover wherever possible. His objective was the high knoll between the two passes.

He was out of breath when he got there, but after a moment in which to still the thumping of his heart he could hear the bawling of a herd of cattle on trail. A little later he could faintly make out the occasional yell of a puncher. Dutch Schiller was assuredly on the march, but it would take him an hour or more yet to reach either pass.

If only Edwards and the others would hurry up and get there! More than anything else he hoped that Joe Perkins would arrive with his wagon ahead of the others. He had ordered the puncher not to spare his horses, but it would be a long, tedious drag at best, and Joe might even get stalled and not make it at all.

He was still looking the situation over when a movement in the brush down by the gate attracted his attention. He watched it critically. It might be an animal, and again it might not. Five minutes later he knew that it wasn't an animal. Animals didn't smoke cigarettes. It would have been too bad for him if he had ridden up to that gate. Now he was confronted with the problem of seeing that neither Joe nor the others blundered into the concealed marksman, or marksmen.

He was deliberating about whether to startle the fellow with a rifle bullet when he was himself startled by the appearance of four horsemen coming up the other way. He was not surprised, but the situation was already becoming torrid. If he opened fire on the men he would be in for a singlehanded battle against them for at least an hour, and maybe more before he could expect help. If he allowed them to choose their stations then they would be in a position to keep his friends from gaining the ridge.

Don Fullmer had never known a more sober moment. This day there was going to be death on that ridge. He knew it. This day might decide whether Jud Motley was to ride roughshod over all who stood in his way, or whether justice and equity were to prevail. He dared not take any action without thinking well of the consequences. It seemed better to watch and wait.

He had brought along Dick Carlton's field glasses, and they proved useful now. With them he was enabled to identify each of the four riders. They were Jud Motley himself, Dutch Schiller, Rick Mays, and the pertinacious Eel. From the top of the knoll where he had established himself Don could have dusted off any one of them with a bullet, but he held his fire.

A moment later the man whom Don had glimpsed stepped over to the gate and signaled the others that the coast was clear. The glasses revealed this man to be Harry Tezak, Don's own particular enemy.

For some ten minutes the men stood and talked. Meanwhile, Don could hear the cattle getting closer. Another quarter of an hour, he judged, and he would be able to see the leaders.

Jud Motley was doing most of the talking, and doing it with gestures. Just to see how it would feel Don lined the fellow over the sights of his rifle, but he had to jerk it quickly from his shoulder lest he yield to temptation. Certainly Motley had done enough to deserve killing; he had been responsible for a number of attempts upon Don's own life. Yet the puncher didn't want to make himself a murderer by shooting without warning.

Finally some plan of action seemed to have been decided upon. The Eel climbed aboard his horse and trotted rapidly back the way he had come. He was not a graceful rider, and he bounced in the saddle like a small boy learning to ride. But his every movement betrayed eagerness. It was only the thought of blood which could make the Eel eager.

"Come on, Edwards."

Motley and Schiller remained close to the gate, while Tezak moved a little farther south than where he had been stationed, toward a rocky ledge overlooking the trail on the Burnt Creek side. Rick Mays left his horse tied in the brush and headed directly toward the knoll where Don lay concealed.

The two gunmen would be in a fair position to shoot down anyone coming from below. Don didn't know whether the Eel had gone for more men, or merely to urge those with the cattle to hurry. Anyway, the first episode was about to take place. There was not room on that knoll for Don and Rick Mays both.

"Hurry up, Joe Perkins."

Don realized that the command of that knoll might well determine the issue. It was a natural fortress, crowned with high, jutting ledges interspersed with growth of scrubby pine and chaparral. From it one could command a view in any direction. Don laid down his rifle and knelt behind a ledge a few yards below the summit.

Presently Rick Mays appeared, not on the crown, but about on a level with Don. He was looking over the Burnt Creek Valley. He came on, evidently intent upon touring the top of the knoll, which, on that high divide was like the hump on a buffalo.

Cautiously Don squirmed downward behind a clump of chaparral no more than two feet high. Mays came on quite nonchalantly, whistling a little tune under his breath. He passed within six feet of where Don lay.

"Hold it, Mays," he ordered tersely.

The buzz of a rattlesnake could not have made the man jump higher,

but he retained presence of mind enough not to try to turn around or make a sound. It would have cost him his life if he had. Realizing that he was covered he raised his hands. His rifle clattered to the ground.

"That's good," Don said. "Unbuckle, and take two steps ahead. No more."

The man complied. Don kicked the fellow's gun belt back out of reach. Next Don made him lie down on his face and put his hands behind him. He took the bandanna from around the man's neck, twisted it tightly and tied his hands together with it. Next he removed the man's trousers' belt and tied his ankles together. He cut short Mays' protests with a threat to club him over the head with a gun barrel. He wasn't through yet. He took the fellow's rifle, ran it between his wrists, and then stuck the barrel beneath the belt around his ankles. He had a small string in his pocket, which he put through the trigger guard and tied around one wrist.

"All right, Mays," he said, "this string is tied to the trigger so that if you give it the least jerk the gun will go off, and the barrel is pointed at your right foot. You'd better keep quiet."

"My Gawd, on these rocks?" the man moaned.

"It's yore bed—yuh made it yourself. I'm just wonderin' if I should gag you. Of course if you make a sound I can blast you, and I will—"

"Don't make it any worse," the man pleaded. "I'll keep shut."

"I dunno. Mebbe if you talk a little I won't gag yuh. That handkerchief of yore's is purty damn' foul— How many men has Motley got here?"

"I dunno. 'Bout fifteen altogether."

"Where's Churchill an' that other bird?"

"They went back to Burnt Crick 'fore daylight."

That wasn't so good. If those two were spying, Joe Perkins and the others might walk into a trap. Don questioned the man further, but learned little that was new. Jud Motley had three thousand cows and steers, all big, strong stuff, and he intended to push them through the heart of the Carlton range, picking up all the Carlton cattle he could, and shove them all onto the limited range of the men below. He would drive in more cattle until the Burnt Creek Range was picked bare as a skeleton. It would not require much over a month. Then Motley would have his own good range to fall back on, but Fanny Carlton and the others would have no place to take their starving stock.

Leaving his prisoner confined by his own rifle Don got back to the crest of the knoll. Far below he could see the white faces of the leaders of the herd. The cattle were averse to being trailed, and were forming a solid mass rather than a strung-out trail herd. The puncher was pleased to note that apparently all hands with the herd were needed there.

It was now a race between the herd of cattle and the Burnt Creek people. Don wanted to go down and hurry up his friends, but he dared not leave his post. Meanwhile, the herd was being unkinked, and the leaders were moving toward the gate. Don saw Jud Motley and his foreman take wire-nippers and deliberately cut the wires for a hundred yards on either side of the gate. At any time he could have stopped that, but he felt it would be wiser to wait.

The sun climbed high against a sky of brittle blue. It was time Edwards and the others were in sight. In fact they should have been there half an hour ago. Don's anxiety increased. Had something happened? The puncher was constantly wiping the perspiration from his face. Now and then he went down to take a look at Rick Mays. The fellow had turned on his side, but he dared not move further for fear of shooting off a foot. It eased Don some to see that Mays was sweating worse than he was.

The last time Don got back to his station he saw four men come on ahead of the cattle to join Motley. Two of them were punchers he had seen with Mays and Tezak on one occasion; the others were Tug Hopkins and the Eel.

Then suddenly, a shot rang out from where Harry Tezak was stationed. Don saw the man raise up and shout something to Motley, but he couldn't hear the words. It indicated, however, that Tezak had seen the Burnt Creek men before Don had.

Jud Motley waved for the approaching four to hurry. He and Schiller made for their horses. Don raised his rifle. Even now he couldn't kill Jud Motley without a warning, but he sent a shot as close to the man as he could without hitting him. Had the situation been less serious Motley's reaction would have been laughable. He whirled clear around, started for his horse, then changed his mind as another bullet whanged past his ear, and dived into the nearest brush. Dutch Schiller had legged it to the horses. Don fired at his legs, but the range was long, and he missed.

Schiller dodged behind a horse and started to jerk a rifle from the scabbard. Don fired again, this time raising his sights. The group of horses broke away, as the one Schiller was standing behind began to buck. Don's bullet had raked the horse instead of hitting the man. Schiller didn't get his rifle, but he gained the shelter of a clump of small aspens.

Meanwhile, Jud Motley had opened up with his six-gun, and Harry Tezak with his rifle, but the range was too great for either to do any damage. Don turned his attention to the four horsemen.

Fortunately for Don the Wolf Creek side of the divide was bare for some distance down, except for the swales. When he turned loose upon the horsemen they galloped for the nearest swale. It was practically

as far as his carbine would carry, and he had little hope of more than stopping them for the time being.

Nobody had as yet been hurt, but this was merely the first skirmish. The invaders had been surprised, but now they knew that there was an enemy on the knoll and they would do something about it. All Don could do for the time being was to try to hold Motley and Schiller where they were. Tezak was too far away to bother with.

Motley suddenly ceased to fire. He had disappeared from sight, but he was behind a long line of chaparral which led to the taller timber and brush beyond the gate. Don heard the man shout something to the others, but couldn't distinguish the words. Schiller, however, was out of sight, and Tezak stopped wasting bullets which would not carry to their destination.

Don also ceased his fire. There was now not a foe in sight. Whether the Eel and the others were going up or down he didn't know. But it was certain somebody was going to try to capture the top of that all-important knoll.

There was danger on two sides. One was from the east, if Motley or the two men with him got between Don and his friends. In the thick timber on that side it was possible. The other was from the northwest, where the aspens ran thickly clear down to the bottom of the canyon. Some of the men with the cattle might come up that way.

Twenty anxious minutes passed. The cattle had come a little closer, but they were now only being held. Once Don saw a horseman riding through the herd whom he believed to be Dutch Schiller. If so it meant that Schiller had joined the four men in the swale and got one of their horses. It presaged an attack from the northwest. In the meanwhile some of the others might be coming up the other way. Where, Don wondered desperately, was Edwards?

Suddenly there came the sharp report of a six-gun from down the eastern slope. It was quickly followed by two more. Don knew the shots hadn't been fired at him. He was half minded to go down there, but if he did Dutch Schiller could come up the other way.

An anxious five minutes passed. Suddenly Don heard a rock roll under somebody's feet. He raised his carbine, ready to fire the instant he saw anybody appear. A minute later he saw a movement in the brush. He caressed the trigger with his finger. He saw the top of a battered old gray hat, and drew a bead a foot and a half below the hat. An instant later he expelled a mighty breath, and knew tremendous relief that he had not fired. The face beneath the hat belonged to Jo Perkins!

"Keep under that ledge, Joe," he called, "this is Don."

A couple of minutes later he met the boy face to face.

"What's happened?" he demanded.

Joe was panting for breath and rather white. "Some skunk took a

shot at me," he said. "And I'm telling you he darn near got me, too."

"Where's the wagon, and the others?" Don was not heartless, but there was no time to talk about narrow escapes.

"They're all down at the forks o' the crick. We've had a tough time gittin' that wagon this far. You told me to try to sneak up here before bringin' up the wagon, an' I did. We kin pull it to the gate from where we are, but I'm wonderin' if there ain't some o' Motley's men between."

"There is. I told you to leave the wagon if the goin' was too rough," Don said. He thought a moment.

"Gosh, who's that?" Joe blurted as he caught sight of Rick Mays.

"Just a varmint. Pay no attention to him. Listen, Joe: you take my rifle and try to hold this knoll. I'll show you where they're most likely to attack. I'm goin' back after the wagon."

"Remember that hombre who shot at me. Yuh may meet him," Joe warned.

"I thought of that," Don said. It was because of that man that he had decided to go himself.

He moved down the side of the knoll until he was well below the level of the main ridge. The wagon, with his friends, was perhaps a quarter of a mile farther on. There might be one man in the way. There might be more. An open space of some twenty feet confronted him. It was down a precipitous slope. He hestitated just a moment, then launched himself downward with a long leap. Wham! A shot sounded from a thicket forty feet away. A slug whispered past the back of his neck. Evidently the sniper had misjudged his speed just a little.

Don's feet came down upon a patch of slippery pine grass and went out from under him as if the ground were greased. The fall was all that saved him from a second shot. Sliding, slipping, rolling Don landed behind a gnarly pine tree just as a third shot ripped bark from the tree. Although jarred from his fall, he had drawn his gun.

It was Don's turn now. He fired at something just showing above a gnarled root, which turned out to be his enemy's leg. The man jerked it up, ripped out an oath. His pain had caused him to raise his head above the stump. Don's next shot caught him right in the temple with a hollow, sickening thud. He rolled out from behind the stump. It was the end of Harry Tezak.

Don hurried on, running now as fast as his legs would carry him. He hadn't wanted to kill anybody, but he was glad to know that Dutch Schiller's two best gunmen were out of the fight. A few minutes later he burst out of the brush where the ranchers were clustered about the wagon, waiting.

"Come on, fellows," he shouted, "we've still got time—" He paused, and his mouth dropped open. "Fanny!" he gasped, "what are you doing here?"

## Chapter 27

"THIS is my fight as much as it is anybody's," Fanny answered quietly.

"But Bobby. What have you done with him?"

"He's safe with Virla."

Don tried to persuade her to turn back. She merely shook her head and told him that she was not turning back unless the rest did.

"How does it look?" Enos Edwards asked. "We heard shootin'. Was afraid they'd got Joe Perkins."

"Not yet. I got the man who was after Joe, but if we stop those cattle we've got to move. Jud Motley and maybe some more are at the gate. We've gotta git this wagon straight up to the other pass."

"It can't be done. There ain't a sign of a road," Jack Stapley pointed out.

"We'll make one," Don said crisply. "About half a dozen of you fellows hang yore ropes onto this wagon wherever you can find room. I'll drive. An, Sis, fer God's sake, you stay behind."

"We've argered with her all the way," Edwards said.

The men had been fastening their ropes on wherever they could. Two of them snailed onto the end of the tongue. All rode horses trained to pull by the saddle horn. At a word from Don they started. With all that extra help the wagon could be moved with ease. The only problem was to keep it from tipping over, and this the men with the ropes could do. Sometimes Don was almost shaken off the wagon, but he managed to stay on and keep hold of his lines.

They had to pick their way through the timber, but it thinned out as they neared the top. By keeping to the draw they avoided the ledges. The load was light, and if they didn't break a wheel or something it seemed they would succeed.

Then, suddenly, there came a rifle shot from the top of the knoll. "Hold 'em, Joe," Don breathed silently, but the volley which sounded from just beyond the pass indicated that Joe was having his work cut out.

The wagon was within a hundred yards of the pass when five or six horsemen, led by Dutch Schiller, swept into the saddle of the divide. Their object was to surround the knoll. They reined up in amazement as they saw the wagon and its armed escort. Then Schiller barked an order, and their guns came up.

The invaders were quicker with their hardware. Their volley sounded before any of the ranchers could draw and use their weapons. Don alone had got his gun out quickly, but his own friends were between him and his foes. He had to hold his fire.

A horse, hard hit, went down, but its rider scrambled free. One of

the men whose rope was on the wagon tongue cursed and grabbed his shoulder. His rope came slack. The others stopped. It was too steep a grade for the team to pull the wagon unaided.

"Don't let that wagon git up here," Dutch Schiller shouted. "They'll stampede the herd."

Don lurched to his feet as the wagon stopped, and all but fell forward over the doubletrees. He righted himself, and blazed shot after shot at the men on the pass, making Dutch Schiller his particular target. The outlaws' horses were dancing. Moreover, Joe Perkins was still raining lead upon them from his crow's-nest. The outlaws had had the best of the first exchange, but now the tables were turned. Both sides were shooting wild, but the ranchers were shooting more bullets because there were more of them. Schiller yelled at his men to seek shelter.

Th ranchers, bewildered by the resistance, milled about the wagon. "They'll kill us if we try goin' over that pass," the man Cassutt raised the defeatist cry.

"We've got to git over," Don gritted. "Somebody block these wheels. Tie your horses to the wagon, an' follow men. Fan, you hold this team. And for God's sake, *keep down.*"

Telling the men to keep scattered, and stay under the ledges as much as possible, Don led the way around the side of the knoll. The only chance, he knew, was to get above the outlaws and drive them back down the draw. He was nearly around to where he could look down on the pass when he heard Joe Perkins yell above him.

"Look out, boys, there's a bunch sneakin' around behind yuh," Joe warned. An instant later a rifle cracked. A man named Gaving threw up both arms and crumpled backward. A bullet had shattered his spine.

Don knew what it meant. Jud Motley and some of his men had followed Harry Tezak around the east side. Now the ranchers were between two fires! Don could see his men frantically trying to get behind the first shelter that offered.

Were they to fail after all? He had counted heavily upon getting that wagon to the top. Three minutes, and two saddle horses to aid the team would pull the trick. Yet first Dutch Schiller's crew would have to be dislodged.

"Hey!" a voice called loudly, "there's a woman with that wagon."

"Git hold of her," came Jud Motley's roaring voice.

"You touch my sister, Motley, and God help you," Don muttered. He was covered with sweat and dirt and blood. A bullet had scratched his forehead without him ever knowing it; but he was like a disembodied spirit so far as feeling was concerned. He ran on around the side of the knoll while bullets from below spattered against the rocks like hailstones. From above him he could hear the brang, bra-ang, of

his own carbine as Joe Perkins fought coolly and courageously. Undoubtedly that covering fire saved his life. Then he was above a mess of turrets and spires of rock which thrust upward above the eroded mountain soil.

He didn't pause. Loading his gun as he started down through those rocks toward his enemies. The firing on the other side of the knoll had now become general. The most horrible fear in Don's mind now was that Fanny would get hurt, but only by taking the aggressive himself could he hope to protect her.

Suddenly he saw where three of Schiller's punchers had taken shelter. They had temporarily lost sight of him. Not much of their person's were exposed, but enough. They were not fifty yards away. His first shot tore through the side of a man's face. The next caused a man to grab the seat of his trousers with both hands and start running. The third shot was a miss.

From where he was now Don could see that the cattle had been turned up this draw. They were still a considerable distance below, but plainly nervous and snuffy. Then, wham! a leaden missile slapped the face of a rock six inches from his head. Involuntarily Don ducked. He heard a bullet screech over his head from Joe Perkins' rifle, and he looked up just in time to see Dutch Schiller dart toward a larger tree. Joe had driven him from his shelter.

"Schiller!" Don shouted, for some reason not known to himself except that he wanted the man to face him.

To his amazement the foreman turned while standing squarely in the open. Without an instant of hesitation Don stepped from his barricade. Their glances clashed; then, as though somebody had given the signal, both guns came up. The guns roared almost together, but Don had been just a mite the faster. Schiller's bullet struck a rock two feet below Don and ricocheted away with a disappointed whine. Dutch Schiller's knees bent slowly, and then suddenly he fell forward upon his face. Don Fullmer's bullet had reached his heart.

Schiller, Tezak, and Mays. The worst ones were out of the way. But there were still Jud Motley, the Eel, and others. Don wondered what had become of Churchill and Draper. So far he had seen nothing of them.

All he could see below him now was occasional glimpses of running figures as the rest of Schiller's men retreated down the draw.

"Hold 'em, Joe," Don yelled to the puncher up on the pinnacle, then scrambled down through the rocks to the pass, and from there to the wagon. A merry battle was still being waged between the ranchers on the side of the knoll, and the gunmen lower down. The thickness of the brush precluded anybody from doing any great damage. One or two of the ranchers had been nicked, but in general they had got hold of themselves, and were fighting more coolly than at the beginning.

Don wanted to make sure that Fanny was all right. The wagon had been left in a sort of swale, and yet it was in an open space surrounded with brush. When Don came in sight he saw that Fanny was having her hands full quieting the horses. She had never, he thought proudly, been lacking in nerve.

Then, suddenly, the breath caught in his throat as he saw a head appear on the back of the wagon. An instant later he recognized the evil visage of the Eel, now contorted into an abhorrent grimace.

Don opened his mouth to shout a warning, then abrouptly closed it again. He might only disconcert Fanny, and cause the little monster on the wagon with her to strike at once. The Eel hadn't yet seen Don. There was just one chance. He would have to shoot within a foot of Fanny, and if she happened to move— He dared not think of that. He raised his gun, not daring to take deliberate aim. Pulled trigger. The Eel melted from sight behind the wagon.

Don, as he ran, saw Fanny jerk her head around, but she didn't scream. When Don reached the wagon the Eel lay still. His face was nothing but a bloody smear.

Don leaned against the wagon to get hold of himself. "God, Fanny," he said.

"How is it going up there?" she asked coolly. "I think the boys on this side are getting the better of it."

Don smiled up at her. "We got 'em licked up there," he told her. "Now I'm goin' to see if I can't git below the rest of 'em down here."

The battle, however, was practically over. Don fired once at a skulking figure in the brush, and this realization that they were being flanked apparently started the retreat. The firing all stopped, and Don saw no more of them.

Ten minutes later Don was back at the wagon with Edwards and Stapley. Enos Edwards' left arm hung loosely by his side, but his face was still grim and determined. "By Gawd, Don, we licked 'em," he said jubilantly.

"For the time being," Don agreed. "Now if we can git this wagon up to the top of the pass before they turn their cattle back we'll stop 'em for sure." He mounted one of the horses himself, leaving the lines to Fanny, and with three horses pulling by the saddle horn they dragged the wagon up to the pass. Joe Perkins, up on the crest, gave a cheer.

"This ain't where I want it," Don said. He turned north, and they dragged the wagon up to the top of a snub-nosed spur ridge and out to the break-off. Straight below them they could see the main body of the herd, and a number of riders who apparently didn't know what to do next.

They jerked off the ropes, and Don and Fanny started to unhitch the team. Don pushed his sister roughly behind the wagon, ordering her to get the horse he had ridden out of sight. Just then the men

looked up and saw them. They grabbed their rifles. Their bullets dropped harmlessly into the side of the ridge.

They got the nervous wagon team unhitched, and back out of sight with the other horses. Leaving Fanny to struggle with them the best she could the three men hustled back to the wagon, removed the tongue by taking out the queen bolt, which Don had loosened that morning, set fire to the dry, tindery hay in half a dozen places, and gave the wagon a start—straight down over the end of the snub-nosed ridge.

"Well, Fanny," Don called, "this is costing you a wagon."

All of them held their breath as they watched. The men with the cattle put up their guns and gathered their reins to get out of the way of the flaming thunderbolt.

There was still a possibility of failure. The wagon might deviate from its course to either right or left, and if it did it would tip over before it could serve its mission. But to their delight it was holding its course straight down the ridge, gathering speed with every turn of the wheels. The wind fanned the burning hay into a solid sheet of flame, which left flaming streamers in its wake.

Suddenly the cattle directly below saw the terrible juggernaut bearing down upon them. Already they were nervous and jittery. They looked once, curled their tails and fled bawling back down the canyon. In one second panic was communicated to the whole herd. Even those that were out of sight bolted frantically. The riders were spurring desperately to get out of the path of the stampede. And then the wagon, now a solid ball of fire, was in the center of the herd. The animals broke, fled wildly out of its path. The wagon struck a wash, careened wildly. Overturned. In five minutes there was nothing left but a pile of smoking embers. But from the canyon below came a sound like distant thunder that was three thousand head of cattle in wild stampede.

"It took Jud Motley two weeks to gather that herd," Don remarked. "Even if he gathers 'em again he'll never git 'em back up this canyon."

"I wonder whut's become of old Jud," Jack Stapley said.

"Got away, I reckon," Don replied. What, he wondered, would Jud Motley do now? He had been thoroughly beaten, and his best gunmen had been killed. By all rights he should accept defeat, but Don had the feeling that Motley was not that type. He would fight to the bitter end.

The ranchers started to count the casualties. Only the man Gaving had been killed, but five of their number had sustained wounds of more or less seriousness. At least three of the outlaws, Dutch Schiller, Harry Tezak, and the Eel had been killed and their bodies left.

Joe Perkins was the hero of the fight. The gangling youth had held his place on the knoll regardless of the many bullets that had been

fired in his direction. He had several rents in his clothing to prove how close many of those bullets had come.

A doctor was badly needed, and Dr. Bland was the only one in the country. It was no more than a fourth of the way to Eden down Wolf Creek than it was back by way of the Burnt Creek ranches. The trouble was that some of Motley's beaten crew might be lurking along the creek. Don, however, volunteered to go for the doctor.

He started to look for his sister, and found her sobbing, heartbrokenly. "Why, Sis, what's the matter?" he asked anxiously.

"This—this fighting, and killing," she sobbed. "It—it's terrible. I've got to get home, Don, right away. I—I'm worried about Bobby."

"Bobby'll be all right," Don assured her. "But you shouldn't have come along, Fanny. You go with the boys. I'll be seeing you tonight some time. No, wait. I may stay over in Eden. If I don't come home with Dr. Bland don't you worry."

Fanny tried to persuade him not to go down Wolf Creek. The irrepressible Joe Perkins eagerly volunteered to go for the doctor. Don, however, resisted their arguments. He had the feeling that he might be needed worse in Eden than at the ranch. There was no telling what Jud Motley might do in the fury of defeat.

## *Chapter 28*

THE stampeded cattle had run for a good ten miles before starting to spread out over the lower ridges. Don found where some of them had passed through Matt Dawson's fence, which showed the extent of their panic. Undoubtedly some of them would have run almost into Eden.

Acting on a sudden impulse he rode over to the pile of worn-out machinery to see if Matt Dawson's confession was still in the wagon hub. It was. He decided to take it along with him, and deliver it to Mary.

He soon began to overtake little bunches of given-out stock, but he saw no human being until he rode into Eden. As he passed the *Cowhand's Delight* he saw Jud Motley's saddled horse standing in front of the saloon. The animal's head hung low, its flanks were drawn up, its hair plastered against its body from sweat that had dried. Motley had wasted no time getting back to town.

There was an undercurrent of excitement in the town which seemed to permeate the air. Don could feel it as he rode along. It would not be many minutes, he knew, before word of his arrival would be carried to Motley. He stopped by the drugstore. Ran up to Dr. Bland's office. The doctor was just finishing with a patient.

"What's up?" Bland queried. "All sorts of rumors are flying."

Don told him in as few words as he could. The doctor looked troubled. "I'll go right out there, of course," he said. "I suppose you'll want to go, too."

"I don't have to," Don said. "What's on yore mind?"

"Mary and her father. Motley's desperate. There was a murder here last night. Alf Hinkle, the man who murdered the man Tolson was sent up for, was the victim. They tried to make it appear that he fell off a bridge and drowned himself, but he was stabbed. Another thing: Judge Vane got a wire from the warden that the envelope Tolson left with him has been stolen."

"I git it. Tolson hasn't got a thing to prove he was innocent of that crime."

"That's right. Motley has lost his fight to grab the Burnt Creek Range. For the time being anyway. But if he could do away with Tolson, and take Mary away somewhere, their efforts to get back the Silver Chief and their money would fail. The Tolsons need protection."

"Then I'm staying," Don declared.

"They'll be after you."

"Let 'em come."

Bland was ready in twenty minutes. They went down to the house together. Don was surprised by the warmth of Mary's greeting. The situation was quickly explained, except that they didn't voice their apprehension as to her danger. Don, they told her, was too tired to go farther.

"Why, we'll be glad to have you stay," she said with sincerity.

After supper Judge Vane came down to the house. He had a long talk with Don, and shortly after he left two men he had sent came and quietly prepared to stand guard throughout the night.

It was a little past midnight when Don was awakened by a knock upon the door. He had lain down upon a couch in the living room without undressing. He was on his feet instantly, gun in hand.

"Fellow from Burnt Crick here to see you," one of the guards called. Don opened the door and found Joe Perkins standing there.

"Joe! What the devil?" Don blurted.

"Have you seen Bobby, or Virla?" Joe demanded.

"Why, no. What about them?" Don felt a cold shiver of dread.

"They ain't home. They was gone when we got back. So was their ponies—an' their clothes. We didn't know what to do. We finally got Fanny quieted down enough to agree to wait till the doc come. We told her Virla had prob'ly taken Bobby in to Eden. When Doc come she was sure they'd been kidnapped. She wanted to come down here, but Doc wouldn't let her."

"My God," Don moaned, his heart wrung with pity for Fanny. He knew the identity of the kidnappers. He had wondered why Ralph Churchill and Bill Draper had not been at the pass. He was wrong

only in believing that they were acting under Jud Motley's orders.

"Fanny said to tell you not to do anything that would endanger their safety," Joe remarked.

The words had the effect of toning down the drums that were beginning to beat inside the puncher's head. Jud Motley was responsible; therefore, he would make Jud Motley bring them back, or else. But Fanny was right. If he attacked Motley it might only endanger the lives of Bobby and the girl.

He suddenly became aware of Mary standing in the doorway behind him. She had on a dressing gown. "This is terrible," she said.

"If I could only get my hands on Jud Motley," Don breathed.

"If they had been kidnapped," Mary said sensibly, "you must wait. Sooner or later the kidnappers will demand their price."

"He may get it, too," Don gritted, "but he'll not live to enjoy it."

"Yuh goin' home with me?" Joe asked.

Don knew that Fanny needed him. And yet he believed that the best chance to recover Bobby was to stay where he could keep an eye upon Jud Motley. Dr. Bland, so Joe reported, was going to remain at the ranch at least until Joe returned. Presently Don composed as encouraging a message as he could to Fanny, and sent Joe Perkins upon his way. It was so near morning that he didn't retire again. The very fact that Jud Motley had not attempted any intrusion upon the Tolsons argued that the man was depending upon his hold over Bobby and the Carlton girl to achieve his ends. The Tolsons, no doubt, could wait.

It was a day of terrific strain. Jud Motley and a number of his men were in town. The injured among them had had to wait for the arrival of a doctor from another town to have their hurts cared for. Twice Don went up town; once to the drugstore, one to Judge Vane's office.

Judge Vane had, of course, been told about the kidnapping.

"Keep cool and wait for them to show their hand," he advised. "I don't believe things are altogether lovely across the street. Tom Hinkle certainly can't be pleased about his brother being murdered. Alf was no good, but Tom did take care of him. I've had some men of my own doing a little spying. Tom stays shut up in his office most of the time. Crip Bloom has tried to get in there three times, and once Jud himself failed. I'm watching developments over there with great interest."

As Don left the judge's office he encountered Matt Dawson swinging along on his crutches. "Oh, Matt," he called impulsively.

The crippled man stopped, his face registering hate for the man he still blamed for the loss of his foot. "Wha'd' yuh want?" he growled.

"Just want you to take a message to Jud Motley. We caught Rick Mays yesterday, and are holdin' him prisoner. He ain't talked much yet, but he's intimated that he could tell a lot about Motley hiring him an' Tezak to shoot Ad Tolson and me, an' some other things, includin' how Dick Carlton was killed. Now you tell Motley that I know

he had Virla Carlton and my nephew Bobby kidnapped. Tell him that if they ain't back home by tomorrow mornin' that we'll put a rope around Mays' neck unless he talks, and we figure he'll talk plenty. Have you got that?"

"I got it," Dawson said, and hurried toward the *Cowhand's Delight*.

Fifteen minutes later Dawson appeared at the green house. Don saw Mary involuntarily shrink. He told her not to be afraid.

"Well, Dawson, what is it?" Don asked curtly.

"Jud Motley said to tell you that it's a damn lie about him kidnappin' anybody. An' he says to tell you that you an' yore sister will both be arrested for the murder of Dutch Schiller unless she makes the kind of deal Jud wants. Schiller was killed on the west side o' the divide, on his own range."

"You tell Motley that if that is the best kind of bluff he can run he'd better pack his war bag for a long stay in jail. And if my nephew ain't back in the morning I'll be coming after him."

A few minutes later Matt Dawson swung into Motley's private office. "Well?" Motley growled.

The big rancher had aged ten years almost overnight. Only a few weeks ago he had been complete master of Eden, with nothing in sight to keep him from completely cementing his little empire and getting a beautiful girl. Now he was frightened.

The defeat had shattered his morale. To add to his worry had been his lawyer's peculiar attitude. Tom Hinkle knew enough to completely ruin him. He had known that Hinkle might take the murder of his brother pretty hard, but he had thought he could talk him out of it. He had hoped it would appear a drunken accident, but the Eel had bungled the job. Now the Eel was dead, and Jud had himself called through the door of Hinkle's office that the Eel had killed Alf Hinkle because of a private grudge. Still Hinkle had refused to answer or to open the door. Was he planning betrayal? Was he afraid that he, too, would be murdered?

Then Matt Dawson had sprung the astonishing news that Bobby Carlton and his aunt had been abducted. Motley was no more perplexed by it than Don Fullmer had been. Churchill and Draper had promised to be on the alert to put a bullet through Fullmer; instead they abducted the girl and child for their own purposes. Could that fact be made to redound to his own benefit, or would it, too, bring him nearer to the verge of ruin like everything else that had happened since that saddle bum, Don Fullmer, had struck the country?

Fullmer's message about Rick Mays had been just as ominous. Mays could tell plenty if he talked, and with a rope around his neck he might do it. Motley would not have admitted it, but he felt lost without Dutch Schiller and the Eel. Of all his henchmen these were

the only ones he could depend upon for absolute loyalty. Now both were dead.

Gradually Motley began to prepare his mind for the acceptance of defeat. But he still hoped to win his fight and remain as virtually emperor of Eden.

He was seated morosely at his desk when Crip Bloom, who had been the Eel's understudy, came in. Motley looked up with a scowl.

"That Draper feller is comin' in," Crip announced.

About five minutes later the taciturn Bill Draper strode into the office. He found himself confronted with a leveled revolver which Jud held in both hands as he leaned back in his chair.

"Now, you skunk, where's that girl an' kid?" Jud demanded.

Draper seemed not in the least concerned. "Better put away that iron, Motley; yuh can't scare me none," he said easily. "If you bump me off yuh'll scare my pardner, an' yuh won't git a chance to git 'em back. If yuh don't everybody'll know you kidnapped 'em, an' yuh can't bluff yore way outa that."

"What makes yuh think I want 'em back?" Jud grunted. "I kin bargain with the kid's mother just the same as if I had 'em."

"Oh, no, yuh can't. You can't bargain at all till the kid is returned an' tells who took him. It'll cost yuh just ten thousand cold cash, an' the only reason we're lettin' yuh off that easy is that we know we can collect real dough for the girl. Now put away that singer an' talk sense."

Jud dropped the gun upon the desk. "Yuh fool, you can't git away with it," he said. "The kid's uncle is here in town. Right now he knows you're here, an' he already knows who done the kidnappin'. How you gonna git out of town without bein' follered?"

"Easy. I saw Grubb an' Hires in here. They'll form an escort for me. When we git a few miles out they'll stop an' bar the trail while I go on."

Motley glared at the other man. He was not much to argue. He was perhaps more angry at the two men taking things into their own hands than anything else. "All right," he said at last, "I'll give you the money, but I've got to have that kid before mornin'. You've got to turn him over to Bruce Coates. You kin do as you like with the girl." He opened a wall safe and drew out ten thousand dollars in currency, but before the money was passed over he called in Eden's two limbs of the law, Bruce Coates and Johnny Eglison, to witness the transaction.

Five minutes later Johnny Eglison was on his way to Dr. Bland's house.

"Well, what do you want?" Don inquired. Eglison, he knew, was Motley's man, but he was, perhaps, the best one of the lot.

"I've just been talkin' with one of the men who abducted your nephew an' that rich Miss Carlton," the marshal said.

"Of course you didn't try to arrest him," Don said sardonically.

"I certainly didn't. I don't want the kid an' the girl killed. I just came to tell you that I witnessed Jud Motley pay the fellow ten thousand dollars to release the kid."

"Why?" Don asked harshly.

"Because Jud had nothin' to do with it, an' he wants to git the kid back to prove it. But since he is doin' your sister a good turn he is askin' one small favor of her."

"What about Virla Carlton?" Don queried.

"Jud couldn't do a thing about her. The kidnappers are sure she kin pay a big ransom. They mean to hold her fer fifty thousand dollars. I may say something else. There's no use for you to try to follow Draper because he's leavin' with an escort, who will stop anybody who tries to follow. Bruce Coates is goin' along with him to git the kid," Eglison said.

For a long minute after the marshall had gone Don and Mary stood looking at each other. "That poor girl," Mary said softly. "Can't something be done for her?"

"I'm going to do something," Don said soberly. "I may even have to endanger Bobby's life to do it, but I've got to try to find out where they are. Mary, I'm going to try to follow that fellow and I want you to send someone to the ranch to tell them not to surrender Rick Mays on any condition. I'm surer than ever that he can be made to talk, and if he does Jud Motley is through. If we give him up Motley wins."

"I'll go myself," Mary said. "Father will be all right. Judge Vane and Mrs. Johnson will look after him." Her eyes were misty.

"You're a great girl, Mary," he said, and suddenly kissed her.

"How can you follow them?" she asked.

"I don't exactly know—but I will." He kissed her again, got his horse, and rode away toward Burnt Creek.

Don knew that he would have to reach the pass ahead of the men he was following. All his hopes were based on one fact, that Churchill and Draper had taken their prisoners somewhere into the rough country near the head of Burnt Creek.

By the time Don reached the pass it was too dark to tell whether anyone had crossed recently or not. There was no use to search any way. If Draper was ahead of him Don had lost. He concealed Blackie in the brush, not far from the gate in the drift fence and waited.

It was not a quarter of an hour until he heard voices.

## *Chapter 29*

VIRLA CARLTON had had plenty of time to think things over. She wondered why she had even thought Ralph Churchill a pleasant companion. Worst of all he still seemed to think himself capable of winning her affections. When she told him flatly that she considered him the lowest specimen of known vermin he turned sulky and threatening.

If Churchill was so low she perceived that his employment was equally base. It came to her with a sense of shame that she had been Jud Motley's defender. Perhaps Fanny had been right that anything was better than surrender to such a monster. With that thought came a kindlier feeling toward Don Fullmer. He had at least had the courage to resist such men as Churchill and Motley. But she entertained very little hope that Don could do anything for her now. She was convinced that only money could save her and Bobby—a belief which that youngster emphatically did not share. He insisted that Uncle Don would come and get them.

"If he does show up here he'll git more lead than he kin pack away," Churchill snarled. "Now shut that kid's mouth an' keep it shut, or I'll close him up permanent."

As the time approached for Draper's return Churchill became more and more nervous. Virla, too, could feel the strain. She would at least know something of the fate that awaited them, and whether or not Fanny and Don were still among the living.

It was long after dark when the fellow arrived. Bobby was fast asleep. Virla could see the two men talking beside the fire for some minutes. Then Draper called out to her.

"Git the kid ready, I'm takin' him out."

Virla caught the boy to her. He was quickly awake. "You're not going to take him away from me," she cried. For the moment she was panic-stricken at being left alone with the two outlaws.

"That's jest what we're gonna do," Draper said brutally. "You git loose when yuh cough up fifty thousand plunkers. Not before."

"What are you going to do—with Bobby?" she asked faintly.

"I sold him to Jud Motley," the man said, purposely cruel.

Bobby began to cry and to cling to her. Finally Draper strode away with the kicking, screaming boy in his arms, while Churchill dragged Virla out to the fire and sat near her.

Virla felt a sense of actual relief when she heard a horse approaching the camp. The horseman seemed to have difficulty with his animal, as it appeared to be frightened of the fire. The animal "cakewalked" almost up to the fire as the rider, head tucked down, rapped it angrily with the romal on the ends of his bridle reins.

"What the hell's wrong with that horse?" Ralph Churchill demanded. "He wasn't scared before."

The rider made no reply. He dismounted on the side away from the fire. Virla was watching the man curiously. It was Draper's horse, she knew; also Draper's hat and coat. Yet, someway, it didn't look like Draper even there in the semi-darkness, at the edge of the firelight.

The man stepped under his horse's neck. Started for the fire. He wasn't more than twenty feet away. He had sliced the distance in half when Ralph Churchill gave an angry cry. Shouted: "You ain't Draper!"

The man raised his head then, and Virla gave a suppressed scream. It was Don Fullmer!

Churchill started to grab for his gun. Then, perhaps remembering his enemy's skill with a forty-five, he hesitated. In that instant Don shot an overhand right to the point of Churchill's chin that set him back on his heels.

"Can't take it, can you?" Don taunted.

Churchill snarled and took the offensive so viciously that Don got a punch to the jaw that sent him reeling. The man followed up his advantage. A sort of cloud had seemed to pass over Don's brain. He was no longer alert. His hands were slow to respond to his will.

And then through the fog that was benumbing his mind came a shrill treble that somehow seemed to start his brain to functioning again. It was the excited voice of his small nephew shouting: "Hit him, Uncle Don! He can't lick you! He can't lick you!"

"No, he can't lick me," Don said—only the words didn't issue from his mouth, but from the fighting heart of him. He took the punches which his foe threw recklessly with both hands. Then with a grotesque grin upon his battered face he hooked a straight left to Churchill's jaw and rocked the man. Putting everything he had into the effort, he drove his right squarely under the heart. Ralph Churchill fell forward upon his face. He didn't try to get up. That blow had completely paralyzed his nerve centers. When finally the man turned over with a groan he found himself gazing into the muzzle of Don's six-shooter.

"I told yuh Uncle Don would come git us," Bobby said proudly later.

"How did you ever do it?" Virla asked.

"It wasn't hard," Don said with a feeble attempt at a grin, "except this last session. I beat Draper to the pass an' followed him an' Bruce Coates to within a short distance of here. Draper left Coates while he come in after Bobby, but it was long enough for me to surprise that lousy deputy an' tie him up an' gag him. When Draper came back he thought I was Coates until I had him covered. Then I took his coat an' hat an' come on here. This Churchill was tougher than I thought he'd be."

"I've been so wrong about you," Virla said softly. "So wrong about everything."

It was not yet daylight when the little cavalcade rode into the yard of the Carlton ranch, but they were sharply challenged by a sentry.

"This is Don Fullmer with Miss Carlton an' Bobby, an' a few prisoners," Don answered. "What's the big idea?"

Men sprang up all around them. Lights flashed on in the house, and Fanny Carlton rushed out to take her sleepy little son in her arms.

Don gazed around curiously. Dr. Bland was there. So was Judge Vane with a couple of men from Eden. Also Enos Edwards and the rest of the Burnt Creek ranchers. Inside the house Don could see Mary Tolson.

"You see," the doctor explained briefly, "we didn't know what Jud Motley might try to pull off. Judge Vane decided to come along with Mary and pick up Edwards and the others. He thought Motley might try to take Rick Mays away from here by force. It might interest you to know that Mays has confessed being paid money by Motley to murder you and Ad Tolson. And he's also told us that Harry Tezak was the man who murdered Dick Carlton."

"Good," Don said. "We've got Churchill and his pardner for kidnappin' too."

"In the morning," Judge Vane said, "we'll go back to Eden for a final showdown with Jud Motley."

"In the meantime you'd better get some rest," the doctor said. "Lord, what have you been doing to your face?" He insisted upon taking the puncher into the kitchen for some first aid. Mary was there.

"Oh, Don," she gasped, "what have they done to you?"

Somehow her concern gave the puncher a thrill.

"It's not as bad as it looks," he said.

"But it sure spoiled your manly beauty," the doctor smiled.

"Who cares?" Mary demanded. "I—I—think you're wonderful."

"And so do I," came Virla's voice from the doorway.

Hours later the people from Burnt Creek rode into Eden. As they came up Main Street the entire populace were out to stare.

Judge Vane directed them all to wait in the street in front of his office, while he walked across to knock on Attorney Tom Hinkle's door. He was there perhaps fifteen minutes before he came back with Hinkle by his side.

"Tom Hinkle," the judge said, "has finally decided to make a clean breast of all his relations with Jud Motley from the time Motley hired his brother Alf to kill the man Ad Tolson was convicted of murdering. We now have enough on Motley to put him away for life, and Mary here and her father will get the justice that has so long been denied them. I don't believe Motley will dare to use any more violence, but perhaps you men had better stick around. I want Don and the doctor to come up to my office to witness Hinkle's statement. Mary, you can go back to your father."

Five minutes later the men in Vane's office were startled by a shot from across the street.

A minute later they saw Crip Bloom dragging his clubfoot across the street. "Doctor," he shouted, "come quick. Jud Motley has shot himself."

Dr. Bland hurried out, and Don went with him. In the back room of the *Cowhand's Delight,* where so much of his grasping tactics had been planned, they found Jud Motley slumped over his desk with a gun still in his hand, and a round hole in his left temple. He was dead.

"Well," the doctor said soberly, "it looks like Eden is free at last. I wonder if you had any idea what you were starting when you tried to take that horsewhip away from Matt Dawson that day?"

"I sure didn't," Don confessed. "But it was worth it, just to git to know some darn fine people. You, for instance, Judge Vane. Ad Tolson."

"And Mary?"

"Mary, too. She's the finest."

"She is that," Bland said. "You know, Fullmer, I'd kind of hate to see that girl hurt. I hope she won't be."

"What do you mean?" Don asked curiously.

"Now that this trouble is over I think I can speak frankly," the doctor said. "I've got pretty well acquainted with Mary lately, and if she isn't in love then I'm no doctor. She'll have lots of money now, but so has the Carlton girl. I know it wouldn't make any difference to you about either one of them having a cent if you happened to fall in love with them."

"Look, Doc, what kind of riddles are you talkin'?" Don wanted to know. "I've took it for granted that you and Mary—after you get your divorce—" In spite of himself he gulped and reddened.

"You thought—" The doctor broke off in order to laugh. "Sorry, Don. My wife left me, all right, and I may never get her back. Just the same, like most doctors, I guess, I'm hard to cure. I'm still in love with my wife."

"Oh, I see," Don said unhappily. "You don't want Mary hurt, and you're afraid she's in love with you."

"No, you dope. It's you Mary is in love with. What I'm afraid of is that you've fallen for the Carlton girl. If you have—"

"You're a nut," Don interrupted frankly. "Go back and talk to Vane. I'm goin' down to your house."

The house was overrun with people, but Don took Mary into an empty room and shut the door.

"I'm in love with you, Mary," he said bluntly, but tenderly. "Will you marry me?"

"Why, of all things?" she flushed. "I—I thought it was Virla."

"And I thought it was Doc. How about it?"

"It hasn't been anyone since I first saw you," she breathed softly.

And then they were locked in a sweet embrace.

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